

The Sideways Sammy Season Review 2017/18



Contents

Introduction	2
Club-By-Club Reviews	4
Accrington Stanley	6
Barnet	7
Cambridge United	8
Carlisle United	9
Cheltenham Town	10
Chesterfield	11
Colchester United	12
Crawley Town	13
Crewe Alexandra	14
Exeter City	15
Forest Green Rovers	16
Grimsby Town	17
Lincoln City	18
Luton Town	19
Mansfield Town	20
Morecambe	21
Newport County	22
Notts County	23
Port Vale	24
Stevenage	25
Swindon Town	26
Wycombe Wanderers	27
Yeovil Town	28
Key Performers	29
Coming Next Season	34
The Squad	36
Key Stats	46
Season Review	48
Welcome To League Two	49
Playing With The Handbrake On	52
Life Without Jodi	57
The Trouble With January Signings	62
The Final Kickstart	65
The Play-Offs	73
The Season's Key Moments	77
Player of the Season	79
Young Player of the Season	81
Mark Robins	83
Looking Ahead...	86



Introduction

It's still hard to compute what promotion really means. It took some time for me to really even consider the reality that Coventry City would be playing in a higher division in a new season for the first time in over half a century.

It's simply fantastic to feel the connection there is between the fans and the club at this moment in time. The Checkatrade Trophy victory last season – with a squad packed with academy players – kicked it off, but the scenes on the pitch at the final whistle at Notts County, seeing what promotion meant to the players at Wembley, the open-top bus tour, have taken what was a good thing that happened 14 months ago to whole other level.

Winning promotion really mattered this season. Another year in League

Two would have been difficult for the club, attendances would have continued to dwindle away, star players would have been sold, and I personally think that Mark Robins would have found it difficult to put together another promotion bid.

The debate over whether we could have built on this season had we not won promotion has fortunately been rendered irrelevant by two incredible performances in the final two games of the season. Heading into the play-offs, it wasn't even clear what starting XI Mark Robins was going to pick, in a short space of time, a fully-functioning team-unit came together.

There have certainly been moments this season when it looked like promotion was slipping away from us. Having Forest Green complete the league double over us, that home defeat to Accrington in front of 28,000

(apparently) fans, the 6-2 loss to Yeovil, the away defeat to Notts County that followed, then the 4-2 defeat at home to Lincoln with three games remaining.

Yet, there have also been some unforgettable moments and performances this season – Jodi Jones’ hat-trick on the opening day, beating Swindon at Swindon, Jordan Shipley’s free-kick, the FA Cup run, almost every Maxime Biamou goal, the list goes on. Moments like those will happen, maybe not as often, in almost every season, but it has been made sweeter because it’s been capped off by a genuine achievement in promotion.

The combination of those sublime moments with the more negative ones probably was what served to make victory in the play-offs all the more incredible. We knew we could win promotion, but also that we could throw it away. In retrospect, perhaps it was some of those more negative moments this season that taught the team the important lessons required to triumph in the play-offs.

What has been remarkable about this season has been how often many of the assumed pieces of wisdom about the side have been flipped on their head. At one point in the season, we were the side that could beat the big teams but lost to the smaller ones – there was a period between March and April where the opposite was true. Earlier in the season, we had a rock-solid defence and struggled to score – the aggregate score across our three play-off games was 8-3.

Mark Robins deserves credit for the way he has managed to evolve the side this season. For half the season, we were the team of Jodi Jones and Duckens Nazon, when we lost them, Robins evolved the team into a more

direct side to get the best out of Marc McNulty and Maxime Biamou, while also bringing on the young talents of Tom Bayliss and Jordan Shipley in midfield.

Without getting too far ahead of myself with this season review, the signings of Michael Doyle and Liam Kelly were also pretty crucial to how the season played out for us. Not only did they really come to the fore during the play-offs – Kelly in particular by playing a more aggressive, closing-down role in central midfield in those final two games – but the experience and leadership they offered were probably one of the key reasons why we adapted so seamlessly to life in League Two – whereas the likes of Port Vale and Chesterfield, who went down from League One with us, struggled so badly.

There was a chance that this season could have been very difficult for us. Portsmouth and Bradford City are examples of big clubs who’ve struggled for several seasons after dropping to this level. There is a pressure in every game that comes from being the biggest club in the division, yet we’ve shouldered it well through a combination of experience and youth.

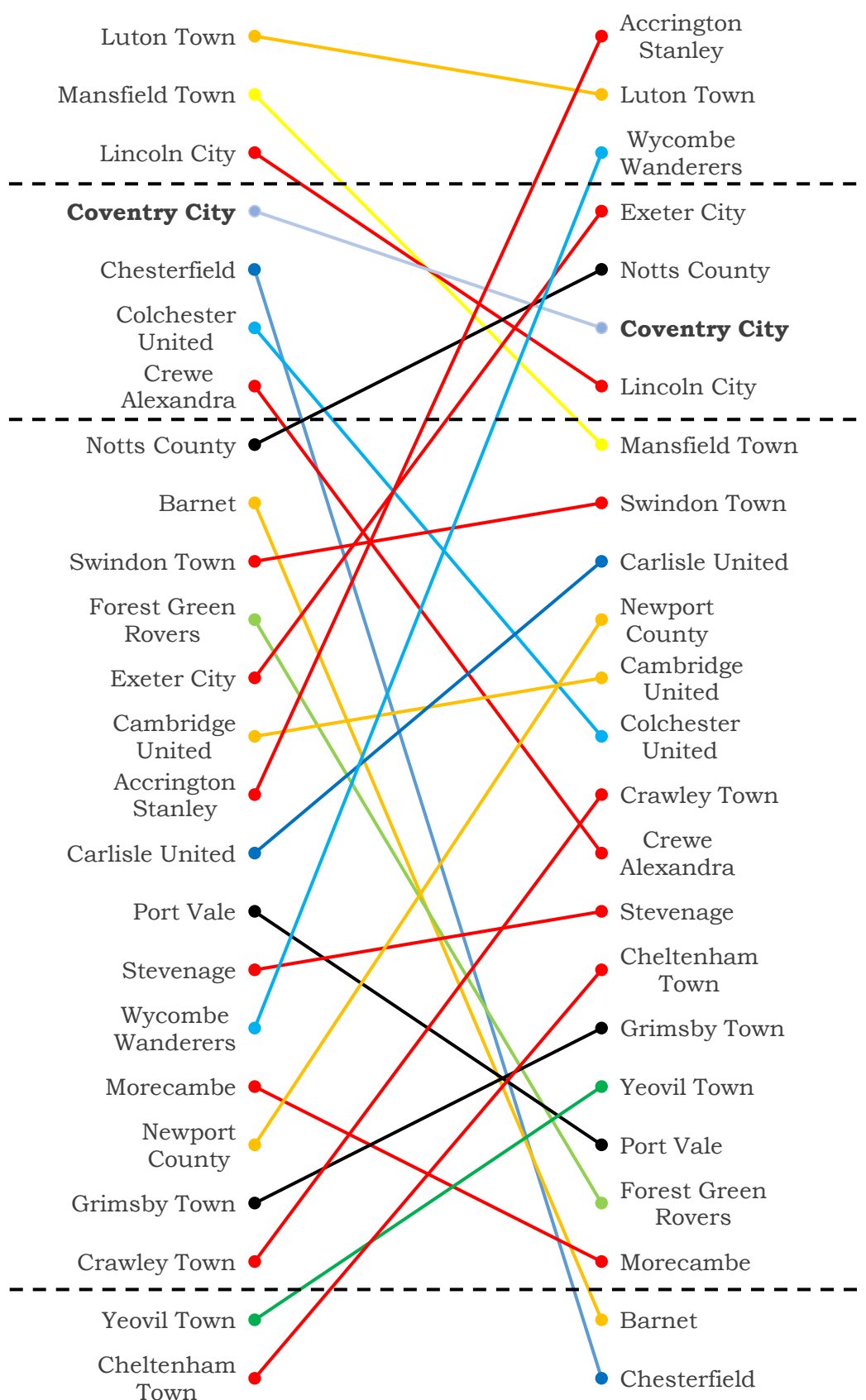
The experience has meant that the lows we’ve experienced this season haven’t completely derailed us. The youth though has provided the explosiveness required at times to break through mean defences or to win important games.

There have been so many key moments and turning-points of this season that (for once, perhaps) a massively detailed season review could well do it justice. Fortunately, I’m here to provide just that.

Enjoy.

Club-By-Club Reviews

How My Predictions Played Out...





Accrington Stanley

Final Position: 1st

Top Scorer

Billy Kee
(25)

Most Assists:

Sean McConville
(8)

Most Goals Involved In:

Billy Kee
(29)

Players Used:

31

Clean Sheets:

19

Most Apps:

Billy Kee & Mark Hughes (46)

Highest League Position:

1st

Lowest League Position:

10th

What I Said...

"A lack of a reliable goalkeeper is probably the biggest concern, along with having a fairly small squad. They are one of many play-off outsiders, but it seems most likely that it will be a mid-table season at the Crown Ground."

The Manager

John Coleman: Sometimes a club and a manager just work together. Coleman's ability to motivate journeyman pros and younger cast-offs from bigger clubs forms a powerful team ethic at Accrington. Not only that, but his side can play excellent football at times, which often catches bigger clubs off-guard.

Star Player

Billy Kee: Having been perceived as a fairly lazy and one-dimensional striker at other clubs, Kee's work-rate, aerial ability, link play, as well as finishing provides the pivot in attack that makes everything work up front for Accrington Stanley.

Overview

While many of the top teams in this division fired their way to promotion, Accrington showed that a rock-solid defence can also lead to success at this level. With one of the smallest budgets too, Accrington's title-winning season was a remarkable feat of coaching from manager John Coleman.

Having been expected to struggle following the losses of key

players in Shay McCartan in attack, along with Matty Pearson and Omar Beckles in defence, Accrington began the season strongly, thanks largely to the form of the pacey summer signing Kayden Jackson up front in tandem with the reliable Billy Kee.

Things looked in danger of tailing-off when Jackson lost form during the winter months, but a stern run of clean sheets and narrow victories saw them shoot up the table over the spring. Keeping it tight at the back meant that the attacking combination play of Billy Kee, Kayden Jackson, with Sean McConville and Jordan Clark out wide was a powerful combination.

For all the pre-season talk of the expensively assembled Luton Town or Mansfield Town sides blowing this division away, Accrington have quietly put together a dominant season, their consistency giving them the edge in the title race. The jump to League One could well be a tall order for Accrington, but clubs like Rochdale have shown in recent years that well-managed sides at that level on miniscule budgets can more than punch their weight.



Barnet

Final Position: 23rd

Top Scorer

Shaq
Coulthirst
(10)

Most Assists:

Jamal
Campbell-Ryce
(5)

Most Goals Involved In:

Shaq
Coulthirst
(12)

Players Used:

37

Clean Sheets:

8

Most Apps:

Ricardo
Almeida
Santos (40)

Highest League Position:

4th

Lowest League Position:

24th

What I Said...

"With an exciting young manager and several young talents possibly on the verge of breakthrough seasons, Barnet could surprise many by challenging closely for the top seven."

The Manager

John Still: Following yet another departure from the club by Martin Allen, the vastly-experienced John Still has been called in to return Barnet to the Football League. A serial promotion-winner and with an excellent eye for non-league talent, Barnet look to have the right man in place.

Star Player

Mauro Vilhete: A versatile and hard-working player who has covered a number of positions in defence and midfield for Barnet this season, all while carrying an injury. One of few reliable performers for the Bees this season.

Overview

Having looked like possible (very) dark horses for a play-off tilt heading into the new season, serious injuries to key striker John Akinde, defender Elliott Johnson and goalkeeper Jack Stephens robbed Barnet of quality at both ends of the pitch. It was a bad situation that was then made worse by the farcical managerial turnover that even Martin Allen – so often the club's saviour in previous spells at the club – couldn't salvage.

A decent start to the season petered out as the rookie manager, Rossi Eames, struggled to cope under the pressure of a few bad results. Mark McGhee – originally hired as a Director of Football figure before Eames walked out – stepped into the breach and only served to further demoralise a team already playing without confidence. Performances improved under Graham Westley, but not results, before Martin Allen was called in as a 'Hail Mary' move with relegation almost certain.

Barnet's large and youthful squad proved to be more of a curse than blessing, leading to a lack of consistency of selection and players easily losing confidence and form, not helped by a lack of leadership in the managerial dugout and at boardroom level as events played out.

Off-the-pitch, Barnet remain in a healthy state given their impressive facilities at The Hive. While John Still will surely have them challenging for promotion back to this level next season, over the longer-term, Barnet need to change the club's mind-set at League Two level beyond simply surviving.



Cambridge United

Final Position: 12th

Top Scorer

Uche
Ikpeazu (13)

Most Assists:

Jevani
Brown (8)

Most Goals Involved In:

Uche Ikpeazu
& George
Maris (17)

Players Used:

27

Clean Sheets:

18

Most Apps:

Greg Taylor,
David Forde &
Brad Halliday
(46)

Highest League Position:

7th

Lowest League Position:

21st

What I Said...

"Cambridge have a strong enough squad to reach the playoffs. However, Shaun Derry hasn't convinced as a manager in his short career thus far... This may not be a particularly memorable season for Cambridge United."

The Manager

Joe Dunne: Has seemed to have improved the mood, and playing style, at Cambridge during his interim spell in charge, before being rewarded with the permanent job. However, an underwhelming previous stint as manager of Colchester should temper the optimism of Dunne as an appointment over a longer period.

Star Player

Jevani Brown: Plucked from relatively obscurity in non-league over the summer and has developed into a creative force, even in Shaun Derry's brutalist style of football. An attacking midfielder with excellent passing and an eye for the spectacular, he could well be set for bigger things next season.

Overview

Cambridge United will probably be viewing this season as a wasted one, after waiting too long to end the flagging reign of Shaun Derry to salvage a tilt at the play-offs with what was a squad that promised a lot more than an underwhelming mid-table finish.

Heading into the season, Derry had the responsibility of signing

players removed from him, but had been armed with ex-Carlisle talisman Jabo Ibehre in attack, golden oldie David Forde in goal, along with the signing of non-league gem Jevani Brown to bolster an attack already possessing the hulking Uche Ikpeazu and with the energetic George Maris and Piero Mingoia in wide areas.

Cambridge only demonstrated their potential intermittently this season. Forde's performances in goal meant clean sheets were rarely hard to come by, but Derry's stifling tactics robbed a strong attacking line-up of inspiration, leading to some insipid displays to prevent any sense of momentum building around the club.

Joe Dunne lifted the mood of the club with some more vibrant football, with midfielder George Maris in particular benefitting from Dunne's management. With reports of a smaller budget next season and with Dunne's struggles in his previous managerial job though, the jury is out as to whether Cambridge will kick on from a decent end to the season.



Carlisle United

Final Position: 10th

Top Scorer

Jamie Devitt
(10)

Most Assists:

Jamie Devitt
& James
Brown (5)

Most Goals Involved In:

Jamie Devitt
(15)

Players Used:

26

Clean Sheets:

15

Most Apps:

Mike Jones
(43)

Highest League Position:

5th

Lowest League Position:

18th

What I Said...

"There is the potential for things to implode at Carlisle were they to start the season poorly. The squad is too strong to find itself in relegation danger, but is in need of two or three key players to match last season's top seven finish."

The Manager

Vacant: Despite making the play-offs last season, Carlisle looked to be on a downwards trajectory heading into the season. Although a return to the top seven never looked on this season, there were signs of improvement over the course of the campaign and Carlisle may regret allowing Curle to leave this summer.

Star Player

Clint Hill: The vastly experienced former QPR and Rangers defender arrived to steady one of the division's leakiest defences into one of the best over the second-half of the season. Has since retired from football to pursue a coaching career at Fleetwood Town, he'll be sorely missed by Carlisle.

Overview

Carlisle looked a club in danger of dropping from a play-off side last season into potential relegation contenders this time out. Having lost key strikers in Charlie Wyke and Jabo Ibehre in the six months leading up to the season and being in poor form since the start of 2017, all signs appeared to be pointing downwards.

Patience in manager Keith Curle though proved to be a sensible decision with Carlisle playing the season out in mid-table and looking more likely to end up in the play-offs than in the bottom half. Having leaked goals for most of last season, it was surprising that it was the defence that salvaged Carlisle's campaign, with Clint Hill a key signing in September and Brentford loanee Jack Bonham improving massively in goal over the course of the campaign.

A lack of consistency among their attacking players was probably the difference as they fell short in their late chase for the play-offs – albeit, having lost key attacking midfielder Nicky Adams. The likes of Reggie Lambe, Hallam Hope and Jamie Devitt were potential match-winners on their day, but those days weren't often enough for Carlisle.

This is an important summer for Carlisle, they first need to source a replacement for Keith Curle in what is an increasingly extended managerial search. They then need to rebuild large swathes of the squad on what looks to be a reduced budget. Next year could be a difficult one for the club if they don't get things right.



Cheltenham Town

Final Position: 17th

Top Scorer

Mohamed Eisa (23)

Most Assists:

Carl Winchester (6)

Most Goals Involved In:

Mohamed Eisa (28)

Players Used:

29

Clean Sheets:

10

Most Apps:

Mohamed Eisa (45)

Highest League Position:

12th

Lowest League Position:

24th

What I Said...

"With Gary Johnson in charge, there is always the potential for Cheltenham to massively over-perform... With a small squad and few matchwinners... it seems likely that Cheltenham will be battling against the drop."

The Manager

Gary Johnson: With Cheltenham looking like one of the relegation favourites, Johnson deserves credit for taking them to mid-table safety. However, he has been unable to stamp out a fragility in defence and is coming under increasing pressure from Cheltenham fans as a result.

Star Player

Mohamed Eisa: Made the step-up from non-league with ease this season as he matured into one of League Two's most lethal strikers. His pace and skill made him a knife through hot butter at times this season, is surely now set for a move to a good League One club at the very least.

Overview

Having struggled for much of the previous season, there was little about Cheltenham's summer activity that suggested they would be due for much better this time out. However, Gary Johnson's keen eye for talent has proven second-to-none once again by signing Mohamed Eisa – the division's breakout star – from non-league Greenwich Borough which has ultimately proven the difference between a relegation struggle and mid-table

obscurity for Cheltenham this season.

It hasn't just been about Eisa though, the performances of Joe Morrell in midfield and utility full-back/midfielder Carl Winchester have given Cheltenham creativity and composure in midfield, which threatened at times to make them one of the division's surprise packages. Ultimately though, a profligacy in front of goal and disorganisation in defence curtailed any play-off ambitions.

While there is the potential to kick-on if Johnson can sort out the defence, the likely departure of key man Mohamed Eisa over the summer is likely to dampen any hopes of kicking on from a decent, but underwhelming, campaign.

Given the nature that the season drifted away from Cheltenham, there is pressure from the stands on Gary Johnson to start next season strongly. The start to the summer transfer activity for Cheltenham has been promising, but it's about how they perform on the pitch when the season starts.



Chesterfield

Final Position: 24th

Top Scorer

Kristian
Dennis (19)

Most Assists:

Louis Reed
& Andy
Kellett (4)

Most Goals Involved In:

Kristian
Dennis (21)

Players Used:

40

Clean Sheets:

7

Most Apps:

Kristian
Dennis (43)

Highest League Position:

18th

Lowest League Position:

24th

What I Said...

"With an intriguing squad allied with a few key experienced campaigners, Chesterfield seem set-up to challenge for promotion. However, I'm still to be convinced by Gary Caldwell as a manager."

The Manager

Martin Allen: Having gambled on the inexperienced Jack Lester this season while the club was fighting relegation, Chesterfield have moved towards the polar opposite in Martin Allen. An excellent motivator of players and with two promotions on his CV, he should be just the man to give the club a desperately-needed kick up the arse.

Star Player

Kristian Dennis: An argument for why a prolific goalscorer isn't necessarily the be all and end all for teams. An excellent penalty area striker who has since signed for Notts County, the problem for Chesterfield was the other 10 players on the pitch.

Overview

In the space of three seasons, Chesterfield have gone from League One play-off contenders to Non-League. It hasn't been necessarily down to neglect at boardroom level – having reportedly had around a top seven budget this season – instead, a string of poor managerial appointments has sent the club tumbling out of the Football League.

The worst managerial decision made by the Chesterfield board this season was probably backing Gary Caldwell – who had overseen a dismal 24th place finish in League One the previous season – with money to rebuild the squad. The big-money signing Chris O'Grady failed to find form up front, while Caldwell persisted with a brand of possession football ill-suited to the division or squad at his disposal, Chesterfield began the season in rotten form.

The decision to go for an inexperienced manager in Jack Lester to give a club that had grown accustomed to losing a lift, rendered a bad start to the season into a terminal one. Despite improved performances, Lester lacked the pragmatism to eke out results in tight contests.

As a club from a town with a similar level of population to Nuneaton, there is no guarantee they will return to the Football League over the course of time. The appointment of Martin Allen seems a step in the right direction, but the National League is a difficult division to get out of and the club should never have found itself in this position.



Colchester United

Final Position: 13th

Top Scorer

Sammie Szmodics
(12)

Most Assists:

Drey Wright
(7)

Most Goals Involved In:

Sammie Szmodics
(15)

Players Used:

34

Clean Sheets:

13

Most Apps:

Drey Wright,
Sam Walker &
Mikael Mandron
(44)

Highest League Position:

5th

Lowest League Position:

23rd

What I Said...

"Were it not for the loss of key attacking players, Colchester would be among my favourites for automatic promotion. As it stands, the squad looks slightly weaker than last season's, but...they should finish higher nonetheless."

The Manager

John McGreal: Still learning the ropes as a manager but has shown that he can get a young team playing pleasing football at this level, at least for periods. However, Colchester were passive at times this season in both boxes which cost them a play-off place.

Star Player

Sammie Szmodics: Slightly inconsistent, but the attacking midfielder's skill on the ball and eye for a goal threatened to lift Colchester from mid-table into a play-off spot. The latest promising talent to progress through Colchester's academy, which has become the lifeblood of the club.

Overview

Colchester looked a side ready to make a concerted bid for the play-offs, if not automatic promotion, heading into this season. With momentum from a strong end to the previous campaign and a squad packed out with highly-promising young players, the only way things looked to be for Colchester was up.

However, John McGreal's inexperience as a manager has

shown at times this season. Both transfer deadline days saw too many players brought in which disrupted any sense of momentum building. Additionally, inconsistencies with team selection and tactics further hampered Colchester's ability to get going.

There have been some impressive individual performances for Colchester this season, with Sammie Szmodics the most notable. Wingers Courtney Senior and Drey Wright have also caught the eye, along with midfielders Tom Lapslie and Sean Murray – with Ben Stevenson making a positive impact too after signing on loan.

McGreal needs to spend the summer developing a more defined idea of what Colchester are going to look like next season. While their academy continues to produce highly-talented youngsters, someone at the club needs to make sure that those players actually achieve something before they're sold onto bigger clubs.



Crawley Town

Final Position: 14th

Top Scorer

Jimmy Smith
& Enzo
Boldewijn (10)

Most Assists:

Jordan
Roberts (6)

Most Goals Involved In:

Jimmy
Smith (15)

Players Used:

26

Clean Sheets:

10

Most Apps:

Enzo
Boldewijn
(45)

Highest League Position:

9th

Lowest League Position:

24th

What I Said...

"It appears that Crawley are playing a high stakes game this season, which could potentially make them surprise packages... [It] looks set to be a relegation battle, although they may just have the quality to stay up."

The Manager

Harry Kewell: The disaster foreseen of the appointment of a famous ex-player who never seemed cut out for management never materialised. Took time to adapt to the job but made Crawley into a dangerous attacking side at times – probably the only League Two manager who regularly deployed a 'false 9'.

Star Player

Jimmy Smith: The combined goals and assist numbers from the experienced box-to-box midfielder speak for themselves. While there are more exciting flair players within Crawley's ranks, it is Smith who has been the most consistent and reliable performer for Crawley this season.

Overview

Crawley looked to be setting themselves up for a fall this season by not only appointing Harry Kewell as manager but losing their key centre-forward James Collins and bringing in a number of overseas signings to replace him. Despite a rocky start, those fears have proven to be completely misplaced with Crawley looking more likely to make the play-offs than drop out

of the division, even if their season petered out from the middle of March onwards.

The pace and skill of forwards Enzo Boldewijn and Jordan Roberts have been crucial this season in making a side often playing without a recognised centre-forward function, along with the more experienced Jimmy Smith in midfield. The form of mid-season loan signing Karlan Ahearne-Grant threatened to be the x-factor that tipped Crawley over the edge before a seven-game winless run in March ended their play-off hopes.

With Kewell heavily linked with a move to Charlton and bigger clubs potentially eyeing up some of their better players, Crawley will do well to build on this season. Although, with the backing of chairman Ziya Eren, Crawley are not in a position to have to sell players they could even kick on from here.

All in all, it makes Crawley one of the harder clubs at this level to put your finger on.



Crewe Alexandra

Final Position: 15th

Top Scorer

Jordan Bowery (12)

Most Assists:

George Cooper (8)

Most Goals Involved In:

Jordan Bowery (14)

Players Used:

28

Clean Sheets:

11

Most Apps:

Callum Ainley & Jordan Bowery (45)

Highest League Position:

4th

Lowest League Position:

22nd

What I Said...

"There is the expectation that Crewe will at least challenge for the top seven, the question is whether David Artell can produce the goods as a manager heading into his first full season in charge."

The Manager

David Artell: Showed his inexperience this season in building a top-heavy squad and being inconsistent with team selections and tactics. Despite a few decent runs of form, Artell will need to be more consistent in his management of his players and resources next season.

Star Player

Jordan Bowery: Has finally looked like fulfilling his early promise in his career with his most prolific season to date – despite spending much of it deployed in an unnatural wide position. Quick, strong and increasingly composed in front of goal, Crewe could have a 20-goal a season striker on their books for next season.

Overview

Crewe looked like kicking on from a strong end to the previous campaign heading into this season. In David Artell, they looked to have a more forward-thinking manager than the loathed Steve Davis, with the statement signing of Colchester's talisman centre-forward Chris Porter too, Crewe had the potential to be something of a surprise package.

However, Artell seemed to retreat into his shell when it became apparent that he had top-loaded his side with strikers and failed to bring in quality and quantity in defence. Crewe looked to play positive, passing football but so often lacked the defensive stability to make such an approach work.

Nonetheless, some improved performances over the final months provides hope of something better next season – especially with Jordan Bowery finding form in attack and signing key players such as James Jones, Callum Ainley and Charlie Kirk to longer-term deals. With further academy talents in midfielder Harry Pickering and defender Perry Ng flourishing under Artell's management, there are some green shoots of optimism for next year.

A lot rests now on Artell learning his mistakes both from in the transfer market and in his tactical approach. While Crewe don't seem like a side that will challenge for the play-offs next season, they have several players on their books who could get into many of the top teams at this level.



Exeter City

Final Position: 4th

Top Scorer

Jayden
Stockley (19)

Most Assists:

Hiram
Boateng (6)

Most Goals Involved In:

Jayden
Stockley (22)

Players Used:

28

Clean Sheets:

14

Most Apps:

Christy Pym
(46)

Highest League Position:

1st

Lowest League Position:

9th

What I Said...

"With Tisdale in charge, there should be enough about this side to avoid a massive drop-off from last season. A mid-table season looks on the cards."

The Manager

Paul Tisdale: Consistently churns out Exeter sides that overcome losing key players – Ollie Watkins and David Wheeler this season – to challenge at the right end of this division. However, a contract dispute with the Fans' Trust seems likely to bring an end to Tisdale's reign this summer.

Star Player

Jayden Stockley: One of the most complete centre-forwards at this level, Stockley not only scores goals but creates chances and makes defenders work hard to contain him. Almost everything positive about Exeter this season has come through Jayden Stockley.

Overview

Exeter looked like they would regret losing the play-off final last season to Blackpool, operating as they do on relatively limited resources at this level. The losses of attacking talent of the calibre of Ollie Watkins and David Wheeler would have derailed many other League Two sides, Paul Tisdale simply kept Exeter on the same path they were on towards the end of last season.

While employing more of a direct style of play than many have been accustomed to under Tisdale's reign at Exeter, their manager was able to start the season strongly – thanks to the goalscoring form of Reuben Reid – while rebuilding the squad. Striker Jayden Stockley in particular proved to be a key element of Tisdale's summer rebuild, even if it took a while for him to get going.

Missing out on automatic promotion by just four points highlights the fine margins that denied Exeter a top three place. They may well regret offloading Reuben Reid in January to Forest Green, which left their attack much more reliant on Jayden Stockley than before. Nevertheless, strong performances in defence from Jordan Moore-Taylor, Jordan Storey and goalkeeper Christy Pym, meant Exeter were able to provide the platform for Stockley to make a difference.

Failing to triumph in the play-off final could well be the high-water mark for the club for the immediate future. The likely departure of Paul Tisdale, along with the retirement of their Director of Football, potentially robs the club of structure off-the-pitch, while the losses of key players on-the-pitch looks likely.



Forest Green Rovers

Final Position: 21st

Top Scorer

Christian Doidge (20)

Most Assists:

Christian Doidge & Reece Brown (5)

Most Goals Involved In:

Christian Doidge (25)

Players Used:

35

Clean Sheets:

7

Most Apps:

Lee Collins (43)

Highest League Position:

13th

Lowest League Position:

24th

What I Said...

"It's been an oddly understated summer for such a typically boisterous club. Consolidation in the Football League looks to be on the cards, although that may not be what the club's owner is seemingly demanding."

The Manager

Mark Cooper: His tendency to freeze out key players during tough runs, along with attempts to play out from the back with players not suited to doing so has seen Forest Green underperform this season, given their resources. Lucky to still be in the job and next season is a big one for his managerial career.

Star Player

Christian Doidge: Proved this season that his excellent form in the National League could easily be translated to Football League level. A strong and mobile centre-forward who can score a range of goals, he could surely make the step up further to League One over the summer, although it will take a large bid to prise him away.

Overview

There was an expectation that Forest Green were going to continue the reputation as the brash, big-spending, upstarts that they had been in the National League. However, the poor tactical and man management skills of Mark Cooper seem to have held them back for this year at least.

For a long period of this season, Forest Green looked set to be the first side promoted from non-league to be relegated in their first Football League season, yet they were able to spend their way out of the quagmire in January, which engendered an excellent run of form at home over the Spring months.

In Christian Doidge, along with Reuben Reid and the impressive January signing Dayle Grubb, Forest Green possess the attacking quality to have done a lot better than scrape survival. Even players like midfield enforcer Isaiah Osbourne and the likes of Gavin Gunning and Farrend Rawson in defence could have formed at least a mid-table side at this level. The blame for failing to do so is Mark Cooper's.

While Forest Green owner Dale Vince has been patient with Mark Cooper this season in establishing the club in the Football League, better will surely be expected next season. Vince's resources could have Forest Green challenging for promotion next season, it all depends on the quality they can bring in over the summer, as well as how much further patience is extended towards Cooper.



Grimsby Town

Final Position: 18th

Top Scorer

JJ Hooper &
Mitch Rose
(7)

Most Assists:

Sam Jones
(4)

Most Goals Involved In:

Sam Jones
(10)

Players Used:

32

Clean Sheets:

12

Most Apps:

Nathan
Clarke (45)

Highest League Position:

4th

Lowest League Position:

22nd

What I Said...

"Russell Slade will need to summon every iota out of a side creaking at the back and appearing to lack quality further forward. This looks set to be a long and hard season at Blundell Park."

The Manager

Michael Jolley: Grimsby took a punt on a manager from outside the usual merry-go-round to lift them in the midst of an awful winless run. After scraping some important results, performances in the final weeks of the season hint that he could lift them to something better next season.

Star Player

Siriki Dembele: His ability to glide past defenders, along with his raw pace, marks him out as someone who will go onto better things than Grimsby. A lack of an end product at times saw him frustrate, but Dembele looks something more than a typical lower league winger.

Overview

Heading into December, Grimsby were within touching distance of the play-offs with Russell Slade leading a rag-tag bunch of veterans and cast-offs to punching well above their weight. However, a nightmare run of 20 games without a win cost Slade his job and Grimsby nearly their Football League status.

Ex-Eskilstuna manager Michael Jolley was brought in as an outside-the-box appointment,

which proved to be just the kind of thinking that Grimsby needed to reverse the sense of stagnation around the club. Jolley provided organisation and leadership to galvanise the team to some key results to secure Football League status.

Aside from the performances of Siriki Dembele in the opening few months of the season, there is little to remember about this season from a Grimsby perspective. Any momentum lingering from their promotion from the National League has long since dissipated and the club faces a big summer in getting rid of deadwood and instilling a sense of purpose.

Michael Jolley will surely be looking forward to overhauling a squad currently packed out with veterans and cast-offs. While it is still early in his managerial career, his reputation as a coach suggests he has the talent to improve the club. Where that leads Grimsby next season, on fairly limited resources, is anyone's guess at this moment in time.



Lincoln City

Final Position: 7th

Top Scorer

Matt Green
(13)

Most Assists:

Matt Rhead
(7)

Most Goals Involved In:

Matt Rhead
(15)

Players Used:

27

Clean Sheets:

15

Most Apps:

Alex
Woodyard
(46)

Highest League Position:

3rd

Lowest League Position:

22nd

What I Said...

"Having a strong defence and being proficient from set-pieces probably means that Lincoln are about 75% of the way there for a promotion-winning side at this level... I'm expecting the feel-good factor to continue at Sincil Bank."

The Manager

Danny Cowley: Has lifted a club going nowhere in non-league into one of the ascendant forces in lower league football. His tactics may be somewhat primitive at times, but his motivational skills appear to be almost unparalleled at this level and is surely set for a long and successful career – whether that's at Lincoln or another club.

Star Player

Neal Eardley: Signed on a short-term contract over the summer, Eardley's quality quickly became apparent as he emerged as one of Lincoln's key players at either full-back position. His energy and delivery, despite fitness issues heading into the season, have been a key element of Lincoln's attacking and defensive play.

Overview

Two seasons ago, Lincoln were a mid-table side in the National League and going absolutely nowhere. That they have stormed to promotion to the Football League, knocked out some big teams in the FA Cup and challenged for promotion from League Two since then, is all down to the managerial skills of

Danny Cowley, and his brother Nicky.

There is an incredible bond at Lincoln between players, management, and fans, which few other League Two sides can get near to. Despite signs of growing pains this season – losing key centre-back Sean Raggett to Norwich, lacking a reliable goalscorer – Lincoln have kept going, thanks to the motivational and tactical skills the Cowley brothers have employed at the club.

While their direct style of play rankles with opposition fans, along with their game management skills and antics of burly forward Matt Rhead, it is done with a clear sense of purpose and buy-in from the players, which makes it an effective style of football. Sometimes simple football done well can be incredibly difficult to defend against.

It says a lot about the momentum of the club that it was surprising they lost in the play-off semi-final to Exeter City – the team that had finished in 4th place – over two legs. Lincoln will start next season as one of the promotion favourites and look very much like fulfilling those expectations.



Luton Town

Final Position: 2nd

Top Scorer

Danny
Hylton (21)

Most Assists:

Alan
Sheehan (8)

Most Goals Involved In:

Danny
Hylton (26)

Players Used:

27

Clean Sheets:

18

Most Apps:

Glen Rea
(46)

Highest League Position:

1st

Lowest League Position:

13th

What I Said...

"Luton look to have the ideal blend of a pre-existing squad and style of play... It would almost be difficult for them not to at least finish in the top three with the talent at their disposal."

The Manager

Nathan Jones: At times it has appeared that the type of football he wants to play isn't suited to winning football games consistently at this level. However, those principles have also led to some huge scorelines in Luton's favour and will probably stand them in good stead for League One.

Star Player

Luke Berry: A statement signing over the summer after reaching 17 goals from midfield last time out with Cambridge. Berry's passing ability, energy and eye for a goal from midfield have been a crucial element in Nathan Jones' style of play at Luton this season.

Overview

Luton Town were expected to blow this division away this season and to have finished second behind Accrington Stanley is somewhat underwhelming. Despite some monumental margins of victory this season, Luton have been a side capable of dropping points needlessly, perhaps a consequence at times of complacency slipping into their mindset.

Regardless of how it was achieved though, attaining promotion is all that matters for a Luton side that missed out in the play-offs last season. For much of the past two years, Luton have looked like a League One side in waiting.

Danny Hylton continued to be focal point in attack with his work-rate, with James Collins adding further goals as his strike partner along with contributions from third-choice Elliot Lee. There were goals all over the pitch though with Luke Berry from midfield and even Dan Potts from left-back. This meant that Luton were never overly-reliant on a single player and have been a fearsome prospect to defend against.

While League One football is likely to present Luton with higher quality defences and teams capable of dictating the play against them, it feels like they are the kind of side who'll relish coming up against teams willing to attack them on a more consistent basis. While a lack of pragmatism at times from manager Nathan Jones has held them back, they are a club that should be expected to make an impression on League One next year.



Mansfield Town

Final Position: 8th

Top Scorer

Kane
Hemmings &
Danny Rose
(14)

Most Assists:

Alex
MacDonald
(6)

Most Goals Involved In:

Danny Rose
(16)

Players Used:

27

Clean Sheets:

11

Most Apps:

Conrad
Logan (45)

Highest League Position:

2nd

Lowest League Position:

15th

What I Said...

"Considering the strength of the squad and the track record of their manager, promotion looks to be the minimum goal for Mansfield this season... It seems inevitable that at some point they will"

The Manager

David Flitcroft: While it seemed a confusing decision to target Flitcroft during a campaign with Swindon where he was achieving around par to replace Steve Evans, even his biggest detractors would surely not have seen the collapse Flitcroft engendered at Mansfield coming. A clear case of a manager trying to change too much too soon at a club playing with momentum.

Star Player

Danny Rose: A hard-working and energetic presence in attack and surprisingly good in the air for someone of his stature. Formed a strong partnership up front with Kane Hemmings, but lost form concurrently with David Flitcroft's appointment.

Overview

Mansfield were heavy, heavy favourites for promotion heading into the season – even if much of the excitement was based around the quantity rather than quality of signings. Steve Evans' track record as a manager at League Two level, especially when backed with funds, seemed to make promotion inevitable for the Stags this season.

While Evans lamented a failure to bring in a proven goalscorer to the club in either transfer window, it was a poor start to the season that initially curtailed Mansfield's promotion prospects. Having put together a run of just two defeats in 20 games though, before his shock departure to Peterborough United, Evans had Mansfield on track before David Flitcroft's appointment.

A physically imposing, although at times unbalanced, squad probably never quite lived up to expectations, even when they were on top form. Danny Rose and Kane Hemmings up front were slightly too inconsistent to be relied upon, while a lack of a defensive midfielder made Mansfield a side prone to counter-attacks. Nonetheless, there are no excuses for David Flitcroft failing to get the club into the play-offs from the position he found them in.

Flitcroft's failure to win any of his first nine games is simply indefensible. It is frankly incredible that the Mansfield owners seem to have doubled-down on Flitcroft's tenure by backing him to in the forthcoming summer, they may have been better-off cutting their losses.



Morecambe

Final Position: 22nd

Top Scorer

Callum Lang
(10)

Most Assists:

Michael
Rose (4)

Most Goals Involved In:

Callum Lang
(11)

Players Used:

24

Clean Sheets:

12

Most Apps:

Michael Rose
& Barry
Roche (42)

Highest League Position:

5th

Lowest League Position:

23rd

What I Said...

"Morecambe have a small squad, reliant on several key players over the age of 30... They should have enough about them to survive yet again, but anything above lower mid-table will be seen as a bonus."

The Manager

Jim Bentley: Deserves immense credit for keeping Morecambe in this division despite the financial limitations he's operating under, this season though feels like he's come very close to the end of the road with the club. An overly-cautious style of play this year has grated with fans, and attendances are dwindling.

Star Player

Barry Roche: Given the importance of Morecambe's defensive feats this season, Barry Roche's regular heroics in goal have proven to be the difference between relegation and safety. One of a number of veteran campaigners that are vital in keeping Morecambe afloat in League Two.

Overview

Morecambe are still reeling from last year's off-field turmoil that nearly saw the club go out of business. With a budget that would reportedly not even rank in the top-half in the National League, staying up another season is a big achievement for Morecambe, although it feels that the club is in need of fresh impetus now after years of struggle.

Manager Jim Bentley has come under fire from his own fans this season for an incredibly negative style of play – which is probably the result of the club's financial disadvantage – which saw the team score the fewest goals in the division and draw the most games.

A sale of the club's majority shareholding to a somewhat mysterious investment group may not be the injection of money and momentum that the club appears to need. With an ageing core of key players such as Kevin Ellison, Barry Roche, and, the now-released, Michael Rose, Morecambe's squad is due a rebuild in most areas.

At the time of writing, it seems likely that Jim Bentley will be there to oversee the summer's transfer activity. While the club continue to punch above their weight by staying in this division, it must have been difficult to see Accrington Stanley overcome similar restrictions this year to win the league title.



Newport County

Final Position: 11th

Top Scorer

Padraig
Amond (13)

Most Assists:

Dan Butler
(6)

Most Goals Involved In:

Padraig
Amond (15)

Players Used:

27

Clean Sheets:

11

Most Apps:

Joe Day &
Mickey
Demetriou
(46)

Highest League Position:

2nd

Lowest League Position:

16th

What I Said...

"There is an improved mood around the club following last season, but... they are still one of the smallest clubs at this level... If Mike Flynn can get this side to survive with any degree of comfort, it would be an achievement."

The Manager

Mike Flynn: Carried the momentum of last season's great escape into this year, but a loss of form over the second half of the campaign cost Newport a chance to challenge for the play-offs. At times it appears he's still in firefighting mode, which can see Newport come unstuck when they're favourites in games.

Star Player

Mickey Demetriou: One of the club's most reliable performers this season as part of their back three. A strong defender but also someone who can get forward in both open play and set-pieces to threaten the opposing goal.

Overview

Despite last year's heroics in avoiding relegation, Newport didn't seem the kind of club that could kick on further the following campaign. However, for the opening few months of the season, Newport were the division's surprise package, with their physical and set-piece orientated style of football seeing them overpower opposing teams on a consistent basis.

Reaching the FA Cup Fourth Round against Tottenham proved to be the high water mark in

Newport's season, in spite of taking Spurs to a replay. It saw the team appear to take their eyes off the ball somewhat heading into a crucial phase of the season, leading to a six-match winless run that ended any hopes of making the play-offs.

While forwards Padraig Amond and Frank Nouble impressed intermittently for Newport, it was the form of their defenders – in both penalty areas – that has been where Newport were strong this season. A physical and competitive side, Newport seemed to relish taking on the division's better sides, coming unstuck when the onus was on them to open teams up.

Mike Flynn deserves credit for Newport not even being troubled by relegation this season, but he will have to evolve his style somewhat if he wants to take the club even further than where they currently are. They have the potential still to challenge more consistently for the play-offs, although they are also a team that has, to an extent, lost the element of surprise it once thrived on.



Notts County

Final Position: 5th

Top Scorer

Jorge Grant
(15)

Most Assists:

Jon Stead
(8)

Most Goals Involved In:

Jorge Grant
(19)

Players Used:

29

Clean Sheets:

13

Most Apps:

Jorge Grant
(45)

Highest League Position:

1st

Lowest League Position:

7th

What I Said...

"I think Notts County have the look of a side who will challenge for the play-offs. With an inexperienced manager and a squad still in need of a few key additions, they may just fall short in their quest for a top seven spot."

The Manager

Kevin Nolan: Built on the momentum gathered over the second half of last season to have Notts County looking near-certainties for automatic promotion for much of this campaign. Struggled to deal with losing key midfielder Ryan Yates in the January transfer window but did enough to secure a play-off spot.

Star Player

Jorge Grant: Not a natural wide player, but possessed the energy and quickness of mind to function in Kevin Nolan's favoured 4-4-2 system. An excellent technical midfielder and also a brilliant finisher from both open play and dead ball situations, however, he appeared to lose form over the second half of the season.

Overview

After ending last season as one of the form teams of the division following Kevin Nolan's mid-season appointment, there were hopes around the club that they could kick on from there, but to blitz the division over the first few months of the campaign was beyond the reasonable expectations of many.

The re-signing of Jorge Grant on loan from Nottingham Forest was crucial in supplying the x-factor to a hard-running and experienced side set up in a rigid 4-4-2 system. Grant's regular heroics in the closing minutes of games gave Notts County the belief that they could beat anyone, regardless of how games were playing out.

The season was in danger of unravelling after the departure of key central midfielder Ryan Yates was exacerbated by Kevin Nolan failing to source a direct replacement and having to alter tactics. Despite a mediocre run of form over the second half of the campaign, Notts County's home form was enough to secure a play-off spot, although it really should have been a lot better based on their earlier form.

While the club still feels hard done by some questionable refereeing decisions during their play-off semi-final against Coventry City, their limitations as a team were exposed – particularly in the second-leg. With star player Jorge Grant leaving the club, along with the likes of Jonathan Forte and Shola Ameobi, Kevin Nolan has a big summer in the transfer market ahead for him in his nascent managerial career.



Port Vale

Final Position: 20th

Top Scorer

Tom Pope
(17)

Most Assists:

David
Worrall (8)

Most Goals Involved In:

Tom Pope
(23)

Players Used:

37

Clean Sheets:

10

Most Apps:

Nathan
Smith (46)

Highest League Position:

5th

Lowest League Position:

24th

What I Said...

"Vale should avoid the worst-case scenario of finding themselves in a relegation battle. However, it's hard to see where the goals are coming from in this team which is why it looks set to be an underwhelming and frustrating season."

The Manager

Neil Aspin: An experienced operator in the National League but a newcomer to the Football League before Port Vale called on him to replace Michael Brown. Steadied the ship and at times threatened something better than simply avoiding the drop, although oversaw a grim run of just two wins in Port Vales' final 20 games.

Star Player

Tom Pope: Returned to the club where he is a talisman last summer and picked up where he left off after disappointing spell with Bury. A dominant target-man who has been crucial in scoring and creating goals for Port Vale this season.

Overview

Like Chesterfield, Port Vale's faith in a manager who oversaw their relegation to League One proved a fatefully misjudged decision. Michael Brown was backed with a reasonable budget to rebuild Port Vale's squad, however, a lack of tactical acumen and motivational skills saw Vale get off to a poor start to the campaign, which set the tone for the rest of the season.

Brown's replacement, Neil Aspin, was left to make sense of a woefully unbalanced squad, but one that possessed some brilliant individual talents in the form of Nathan Smith in defence, wingers Ben Whitfield, David Worrall and Cristian Montano (later converted to a left-back) while the return of Tom Pope in attack is probably the reason Port Vale avoided a double relegation.

Buoyed by an initial upturn in form following Aspin's appointment, Vale pulled off statement victories during the Christmas period over Coventry City and Luton Town. However, that proved to be the zenith of their campaign, as they proceeded to go on a run of just two wins in 20 games to see the season out.

While Aspin can't be blamed for the mess he found the squad in, such an extended poor run of form doesn't bode well for next season. Furthermore, Aspin's January signings appeared to follow the scatter-shot approach his predecessor adopted. The summer has begun with intent in the transfer market, but not necessarily with players you would automatically assume could form a promotion-challenging side at League Two level.



Stevenage

Final Position: 16th

Top Scorer

Danny
Newton (14)

Most Assists:

Ben
Kennedy (7)

Most Goals Involved In:

Danny
Newton (20)

Players Used:

34

Clean Sheets:

9

Most Apps:

Danny
Newton (45)

Highest League Position:

2nd

Lowest League Position:

17th

What I Said...

"With Sarll's inexperience as a manager...[and] some big changes to the squad in the summer...I think this could be a tough season for them ending in a lower mid-table finish."

The Manager

Dino Maamria: Brought to the club he played and assistant-managed for during the Graham Westley era after a relatively successful brief spell with Nuneaton. Appears to be a strong man-motivator who lifted Stevenage at a crucial time, it remains to be seen what he can do as a manager over a full season.

Star Player

Danny Newton: A livewire striker with some excellent goals on his highlights reel this season after stepping up from non-league. His form this season has been especially important after an underwhelming campaign from last season's star man Matt Godden.

Overview

Stevenage ended last season poorly under Darren Sarll, despite being in the play-offs as late as March. However, there was the sentiment that Sarll was growing into the job and that his development of young players meant that Stevenage were in good hands over both the short and long-term.

After a strong start to the campaign, fired on by the goals

of Danny Newton, Sarll's side went on an extended poor run of form. Confidence was at a low ebb, despite some impressive performances at times from the club's academy-produced players such as Ben Wilmott in defence, Mark McKee in midfield and Ben Kennedy out wide.

Sarll was eventually sacked by the club and replaced by former assistant manager Dino Maamria. Maamria's positive persona lifted a talented squad – albeit slow at the back – to a reasonably strong finish, with January signing Alex Revell shining in attack along with loanee midfielder Luke Amos and goalkeeper Tom King.

There's a lot going for Stevenage at this moment in time in the way they develop and improve younger players. It's important this summer that they add some key experienced players to shape some talented youngsters into an effective team-unit. Maamria has made a positive impression thus far, but he is a manager who is yet to see out a full season at a club, so any optimism has to be tempered somewhat.



Swindon Town

Final Position: 9th

Top Scorer

Luke Norris
(15)

Most Assists:

Matthew
Taylor (10)

Most Goals Involved In:

Matthew
Taylor (16)

Players Used:

31

Clean Sheets:

14

Most Apps:

Ben Purkiss
(41)

Highest League Position:

1st

Lowest League Position:

14th

What I Said...

"While Swindon seem better equipped for League Two than they would have been under the previous model, I'm not sure Flitcroft has sourced the quality across the pitch required to challenge for the play-offs."

The Manager

Phil Brown: After taking Southend as far as he could, Brown was brought to Swindon on a short-term basis to replace David Flitcroft and steer them towards the play-offs. However, a failure to figure out the strengths and weaknesses of the squad at his disposal in time for the end of the season saw Swindon limp meekly to the finish line under his charge.

Star Player

Luke Norris: A frustrating player who will just as easily go missing from games as he will score a 30-yard effort out of the blue, Norris has enjoyed one of his most consistent seasons as a striker and has been crucial at times in giving Swindon an attacking threat.

Overview

It has been a frustrating campaign for Swindon Town fans with a play-off place constantly within reach but their team never quite able to seize it. The football under David Flitcroft came under heavy criticism, not helped by poor performances at home, and it was with relief that Flitcroft was allowed to depart for Mansfield in March.

The appointment of Phil Brown seemed a sensible short-term pick to get the team into the play-offs, however, Brown struggled to make sense of the squad left to him – making a number of veiled criticisms at Flitcroft's recruitment – which saw Swindon end the season in relatively poor form.

There is talent in this Swindon squad, especially in the form of attackers Luke Norris, Keshi Anderson and Kaiyne Woolery, however, it never quite seemed to click on a consistent basis. Phil Brown has vowed an overhaul over the summer, but he does have to apportion some of the blame in his direction for what was something of a collapse in the final months of this season.

There have been some big changes in the approach at the club since relegation from League One last season, with this summer promising to be yet another overhaul of the squad. That change may be required, but it suggests a lack of long-term vision at boardroom level for a club that so recently had been one of the most attractive sides outside the Championship to watch.



Wycombe Wanderers

Final Position: 3rd

Top Scorer

Adebayo
Akinfenwa
(17)

Most Assists:

Adebayo
Akinfenwa
(13)

Most Goals Involved In:

Adebayo
Akinfenwa
(30)

Players Used:

28

Clean Sheets:

14

Most Apps:

Scott Brown &
Joe Jacobson
(46)

Highest League Position:

2nd

Lowest League Position:

16th

What I Said...

"If Wycombe can evolve, there's no reason why they can't challenge for the play-offs. However, losing two key defensive players and the reliance on veterans is likely to be yield a lower mid-table season for the Chairboys."

The Manager

Gareth Ainsworth: Looked to be running out of steam with Wycombe heading into this season but a more attack-minded approach this year has borne the fruit of automatic promotion. Next season will be a test of both his man-management as well as tactical skills against a higher quality of opposition.

Star Player

Adebayo Akinfenwa: An absolute wrecking ball of a centre-forward at this level despite age and mobility increasingly going against him. Wycombe's directness in both open play and set-pieces suits Akinfenwa's game to a tee, with him crucial in scoring and creating chances for the side.

Overview

Expectations were reasonably low for Wycombe heading into the season. Gareth Ainsworth's methods and tactics looked to be tiring and having been so reliant on an ageing Adebayo Akinfenwa as an attacking threat last year, there were question marks as to how wise continuing to rely so heavily on him would be.

Fortunately for Ainsworth and Wycombe, Akinfenwa continues to enjoy a career Indian Summer, arguably a better player than he's ever been. It hasn't just been about Akinfenwa though, important contributions from Paris Cowan-Hall, Luke O'Nien, and Joe Jacobson have given Wycombe a wide variety of attacking threats this season.

Additionally, a more attack-minded approach from Gareth Ainsworth has brought its rewards. Wycombe developed a reputation this season for scoring late goals to turn games around, which was crucial in establishing themselves among the automatic promotion contenders over the Winter.

While Ainsworth has developed a strong team spirit, along with some excellent individual performers, it is no certainty that they will be able to carry that over into League One. The manager appears to be keeping faith with the veterans that steered the club to promotion. While they'll have a sense of momentum to start off with, it is possible they will come unstuck against better players and managers next season.



Yeovil Town

Final Position: 19th

Top Scorer

Francois Zoko (13)

Most Assists:

Otis Khan & Jake Gray (4)

Most Goals Involved In:

Francois Zoko (15)

Players Used:

31

Clean Sheets:

13

Most Apps:

Sam Surridge (41)

Highest League Position:

12th

Lowest League Position:

24th

What I Said...

"Unless Darren Way has pulled some rabbits out the hat with his transfer activity, Yeovil look one of the weaker sides in the division...Yeovil could be relegated with barely a whimper."

The Manager

Darren Way: An inexperienced manager, who has shown it with inconsistent runs of form this season, but someone who appears to have a good eye for a player, which is crucial on Yeovil's limited budget.

Star Player

Francois Zoko: One of those maverick lower league centre-forwards who seems to excel at smaller clubs. Not the biggest of players but his movement, touch and eye for the spectacular has provided a figurehead up front for Yeovil this season.

Overview

Yeovil looked to be among the very favourites for relegation this season, to have avoided relatively comfortably deserves credit for their manager – they did, after all, lose 8-2 to Luton on the opening day of the season. However, Darren Way continues to demonstrate signs of naivety as a manager and his team seem to go on streaks of good and bad form, with the manager seeming to struggle to address the cause of such inconsistency.

Relying on relatively young and inexperienced players – mostly loanees and cast-offs from bigger

clubs – Yeovil didn't seem to have the character on paper to successfully avoid relegation. However, that focus on young talent gave Yeovil dynamism and pace in attack that at times made them a devastating force.

After the return of key attacking loanee Olufela Olomola in January, Yeovil could have seen their season unravel, however, good use of the transfer market helped Yeovil get slightly better. The signing of Shaun Donnellan immediately improved a leaky defence, the partnership of Jared Bird and Lewis Wing in central midfield offered presence and drive in the centre of the park, while Alex Fisher proved to be an excellent figurehead in attack to allow Yeovil's pacey wingers to operate further up the pitch.

Some of those aforementioned players will return to their parent clubs, which puts pressure on Darren Way to repeat the trick. But having developed players such as Ben Whitfield, Liam Shepherd and Ryan Hedges the season before, this hasn't been a one-off for Yeovil's manager.

Key Performer

Accrington Stanley's Defence



Goals Conceded

46

Clean Sheets

19

1-0 Wins

10

Key Performer

Matthew Taylor - Swindon Town



Goals

6

Assists

10

**Free-Kick
Goals**

2

Key Performer

Jorge Grant - Notts County



Goals

15

Assists

4

**Last 15 Min
Goals**

4

Key Performer

Adebayo Akinfenwa - Wycombe Wanderers



Goals

17

Combined
Goals & Assists

30

Assists

13

Key Performer

**Danny Hylton & James Collins -
Luton Town**



**James Collins
Goals**

19

**% of Luton
Goals Scored**

42.5

**Danny Hylton
Goals**

21

Coming Next Season...



Manager:
Richie Wellens

Top Scorer:
Eoin Doyle (15)

Most Assists:
Jack Byrne (6)

Oldham Athletic – 21st in League One

A spell of 21 years in the third-tier has been broken, as many anticipated it eventually would, in relegation for Oldham Athletic. A lot now rests on how owner Abdallah Lemsagam approaches rebuilding the club in League Two.

Lemsagam forced several obscure foreign players on to John Sheridan at the start of the season, disrupting the opening months of the season. For a period, it looked like Richie Wellens had the club sailing into mid-table, buoyed by the goals of Eoin Doyle and the form of ex-Man City youngster Jack Byrne in midfield.

However, Wellens' inexperience told in the final months of the season, struggling to hang onto leads – despite the contributions of Duckens Nazon – and saw his side relegated on the final day. If the club can hang onto key talent, they should challenge for promotion, if they're not careful, they could struggle in the lower half.



Manager:
Dean Austin

Top Scorer:
Chris Long (9)

Most Assists:
Matt Grimes (10)

Northampton Town – 22nd in League One

Northampton made some statement signings in the summer in midfielders Yaser Kasim, and Matt Crooks, along with centre-back Aaron Pierre – funded by a mysterious Chinese investment firm. A poor start to the season though under Justin Edinburgh set the tempo for a woefully underachieving season at Sixfields.

Edinburgh was replaced by Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink, who was unable to affect much of an improvement despite being backed in the transfer market with the additions of Kevin van Veen in attack and wingers Hildeberto Pereira and Gboly Ariyibi. What clearly let Northampton down was a lack of continuity and planning, despite investment in the squad.

With the Chinese investment seemingly drawing back from the club and caretaker manager Dean Austin handed the permanent reigns, the club looks set to re-set itself as the mid-table League Two side it has so often been over the past decade.



Manager:
Vacant

Top Scorer:
Chuks Aneke (9)

Most Assists:
Chuks Aneke (8)

MK Dons – 23rd in League One

MK Dons looked to have been evolving on from the Karl Robinson era, with Robbie Neilson having made a positive impact in the half season he'd had to begin reshaping the squad. After making some big – physically, in several instances – signings over the summer, MK Dons looked a decent shout for the League One play-offs.

However, Neilson seemed unable to coax the best out of the attacking talents of players such as Chuks Aneke, Kieran Agard and Peter Pawlett. With fans increasingly unhappy with the physical style of football, Neilson was sacked and replaced by the inexperienced Dan Micciche.

While Micciche was laudably committed to a more progressive style of football, he took far too long to find his first win which made a bad situation much worse. After his sacking, MK Dons are another relegated League One side facing a big summer rebuild, albeit likely as the division's biggest spenders next season.



Manager:
Ryan Lowe

Top Scorer:
Jermaine Beckford
& George Miller (8)

Most Assists:
Michael Smith &
Harry Bunn (3)

Bury – 24th in League One

Bury are another example of a relegated League One side who had invested heavily over the summer – bringing in proven quality such as Chris Maguire, Jermaine Beckford and Stephen Dawson – who were victims of a lack of planning and poor management.

It was quickly apparent that Lee Clark had no clue how to get the best out of the squad at his disposal, which saw Bury start the season in poor form. Chairman Stewart Day took too long to find a new manager, then picked an inexperienced one in Chris Lucketti, who proceeded to fail to win – or see his team score in – any of his eight games in charge.

The season was essentially over by January, seen out by Ryan Lowe in caretaker charge. Bury face a big rebuild over the summer, but with an excellent academy, they might be something of a surprise package, although the early transfer activity also suggests that Lowe is being backed with a decent transfer budget for this level of football.



Manager:
John Askey

Top Scorer:
Scott Wilson (14)

Most Assists:
Unknown

Macclesfield Town – 1st in National League

With reportedly a bottom-half budget for the National League, Macclesfield Town's title victory is one of the biggest achievements of the English season. Manager John Askey – a club legend as a player – has not only managed his resources well, but demonstrated excellent man management and tactical skills in order to squeeze every last drop of performance from his side.

The defensive partnership of the experienced Keith Lowe and George Pilkington has been a key element of Macclesfield's success, along with their 37-year-old playmaker Danny Whitaker. Having won the division with their top scorer on just 14 goals, it really was about a team effort.

Whether some of their veteran key players are capable of stepping up to the Football League remains to be seen, given the budget limitations of the club, it's going to require another managerial miracle from Askey to keep them in the fourth-tier.



Manager:
Micky Mellon

Top Scorer:
Andy Cook (28)

Most Assists:
Unknown

Tranmere Rovers – 2nd in National League

Following the arrival of Micky Mellon as manager in October 2016, Tranmere missed-out on automatic promotion narrowly to Lincoln City, then fell short in the title race to Macclesfield this season due to a slow start.

This time round, Tranmere overcame memories of last season's play-off final defeat to Forest Green to beat Boreham Wood in an eventful final at Wembley – featuring a red card in the opening minute and a late winner – to secure what is an overdue return to the Football League.

While Tranmere have lost key striker Andy Cook to Walsall, their other front-man James Norwood has been almost equally prolific over the past couple of seasons. Tranmere seem like a club well-gearred to make a splash at League Two level, with a play-off challenge a more than reasonable expectation for next season.

The Squad

Lee Burge**Pos: GK****Age: 24****Apps(Goals): 48(0)****1**

Being named in the division's team of the year was reward for Burge for being an integral part in one of League Two's best defences. Whether he was literally League Two's best goalkeeper is another debate, but Burge has been reliable this season – barring the odd howler. The lapses in concentration he has shown at times are probably why it looks like he won't play much higher than League One during his career, but he has already proven he can perform to a reasonable standard at that level, so there is no reason to doubt that we have a League One standard goalkeeper already in place.

Liam O'Brien**Pos: GK****Age: 25****Apps(Goals): 11(0)****13**

Given the occasional goalkeeping howlers that have dogged our season at times, it would be interesting to know whether Robins partially regrets not bringing in a more experienced keeper than Liam O'Brien to challenge Lee Burge. O'Brien has shown that he is a reasonably solid presence in goal, but isn't quite on the same level as Burge is and is equally capable of committing costly errors. A vocal presence at the back, O'Brien will continue to be relied upon to come in for the odd game next season.

Chris Camwell**Pos: LB****Age: 18****Apps(Goals): 2(0)****34**

Chris Camwell is possibly unlucky that he's behind two established first-team left-backs in the pecking order. In his appearances in cup competitions this season he has shown that he's a reasonably solid defender with a pretty good delivery on him and energy to support attacks. He'll be frustrated that a loan at Solihull didn't quite work out, with the manager who signed him leaving the club within weeks of bringing him in. With Stokes and Haynes still with a year on their contracts, it's likely that Camwell will have to continue to bide his time for a chance in the first-team.

Tom Davies**Pos: CB****Age: 25****Apps(Goals): 25(0)****12**

Having arrived at the club as our third-choice centre-back to some poor reviews from Portsmouth fans, expectations were low with Tom Davies. Early performances suggested he was a limited but adequate League Two centre-back who was exceptionally uncomfortable on the ball, however, Davies has been a reliable performer whenever called upon. His aerial ability is his best quality, but Davies seems to have a good habit of calming the defence down whenever he plays. He should remain a useful member of the squad next season, but is possibly someone we might be looking to upgrade on.

Jack Grimmer**Pos: RB****Age: 24****Apps(Goals): 53(3)****2**

After a slow start to the season, Jack Grimmer has made the right-back position his own. While the goals against Stoke and Exeter stand-out, Grimmer has generally been a solid 6/10 performer. Grimmer provides a useful outlet from right-back – even if his final ball is often lacking – and is reasonably solid defensively – although has committed his fair share of mistakes. A player most will be happy with heading into next season, but could possibly do with being challenged to make further improvements to his game.

Ryan Haynes**Pos: LB****Age: 21****Apps(Goals): 25(0)****24**

Based on his performances towards the end of last season, Haynes looked like someone capable of making a big impact for us this year. However, Haynes has frustrated this season with his attacking play rarely coming off and his defensive play continuing to look uncomfortable. It feels as if next season will be an important one for Haynes at this stage of his career. He has the ability to be a force with the way he beats defenders, but there has to be more of a final product because his defensive play alone doesn't justify his place in the side.

Dominic Hyam**Pos: CB****Age: 21****Apps(Goals): 22(0)****15**

Another back-up centre-back signed this summer who has looked solid when called upon. Dominic Hyam looked relatively unconvincing in his early appearances for the club, but became a composed defensive presence when pressed back into first-team action due to injuries to Jordan Willis and Tom Davies around March, then coming into the side for the final four games. A poor performance against Yeovil in the 6-2 loss in April suggests that he could be exposed against higher-quality forwards next season, but deserves an initial place in the squad to prove himself.

Dion Kelly-Evans**Pos: RB****Age: 20****Apps(Goals): 6(0)****20**

Based on his performances last season, Dion Kelly-Evans was unfortunate not to have been backed by Robins to be our first-choice right-back this year. However, Jack Grimmer's form in his position has rendered Kelly-Evans as something of an afterthought in our squad. He's at a stage in his career where he needs football and he failed to take the chance to stake a claim after putting in a rusty performance in his first league start against Accrington in February. Having looked nowhere near a regular starting position this season, it is of little surprise that he has been allowed to leave the club.

Rod McDonald**Pos: CB****Age: 25****Apps(Goals): 41(0)****5**

Little was known about Rod McDonald heading into the season, but he has proved to be one of our better signings. A calm and composed presence at the back, Rod McDonald also offers the ability to bring the ball out of defence that none of our other centre-backs can – although he can hardly be described as a ball-playing central defender. While there have been periods where McDonald has struggled when left one-on-one with forwards, he has generally been an impressive presence in central defence for us this year, although he fell out of favour in the final weeks of the season.

James Pearson**Pos: CB****Age: 24****Apps(Goals): 1(0)****12**

You had forgotten about him hadn't you?

Well, James Pearson played the one game for us this season – a 3-2 Checkatrade Trophy defeat to Shrewsbury.

Based on that one appearance, Pearson looked a relatively decent centre-back and was apparently one of the division's better right-backs while at Barnet before injuries stalled his career. The signing of Tom Davies made Pearson surplus to requirements, he has since moved to Kidderminster in the National League North.

Chris Stokes**Pos: LB****Age: 26****Apps(Goals): 35(0)****3**

Has struggled to nail down a regular place in the line-up despite coming into the side for the final games of the season. A less dynamic left-back than Ryan Haynes, it appears that Chris Stokes' role in the squad is to come in and calm things down in that position when the team is on a bad run. His biggest weakness is that he appears reluctant to put crosses into the box, and he can also be susceptible to quick wingers. However, he's clearly someone willing to put a shift in when called upon, has played well at League One level before and is now one of the club's longest-serving players.

Jordon Thompson**Pos: CB****Age: 18****Apps(Goals): 1(0)****39**

A youngster with no first-team experience heading into the season, Thompson has boosted his longer-term prospects of getting into the side after a relatively decent loan spell in the National League with Barrow. By all reports, Thompson more than held his own at that level, which just shows how deep our reserves at centre-back currently go. Like a few of the other young players around the squad at the moment, it's hard to see them breaking into the team next season due to the contract situation with senior players, but Tom Bayliss has shown there is a route there if they're good enough.

Jordan Willis**Pos: CB/RB Age: 22****Apps(Goals): 42(2)****4**

This has been Jordan Willis' most consistent season in the first-team and he has finally demonstrated his ability to be a reliable performer. It's not just the pace he provides to the back-line, but a determination to put his body on the line as well as to compete with physical strikers – including marking Adebayo Akinfenwa out of the game at home against Wycombe – that has made Willis such an important presence in defence for us this season. A rare example of an academy product who has developed into a regular first-teamer without being sold on or burning out.

Tony Andreu**Pos: AM****Age: 30****Apps(Goals): 6(1)****19**

Andreu was an exciting signing as the goalscoring and creative midfielder that this team was clearly in need of. In his first few appearances for the club, he showed that he might be able to deliver on those hopes, before he was cruelly ruled out for the season back in September. In his 30s, there's a risk that Andreu could struggle to return to the player he was. Additionally, our tactics have evolved away from accommodating a number 10, which could make it difficult for Andreu to get straight back into the side – unless, as a replacement for Tom Bayliss.

Josh Barrett**Pos: LM****Age: 19****Apps(Goals): 8(0)****27**

A loan signing that failed to make any impact on our season, Josh Barrett seems like someone who was either poorly managed or scouted by the club, or both. Constantly played on the left of midfield, despite struggling to influence the game there, Barrett looked like someone lost and confused as to what his role in the side was. There were flashes of decent technique, but it appears like the club didn't get their homework right on a key January signing who could have made more of an impact for us.

Tom Bayliss**Pos: CM/RM Age: 18****Apps(Goals): 32(6)****30**

The emergence of Tom Bayliss seems to be the reason why Jodi Jones' injury didn't completely derail our season. While a different type of player completely, Bayliss' drive and creativity from the centre of the park gave an otherwise obdurate team the spark required to function as an attacking unit. With excellent control of the ball and the ability to glide past defenders, Bayliss looks set for a big future in the game. The one improvement he probably needs to make is in his decision-making in the final third, which is remarkable given that he was our key creative player despite of that.

Michael Doyle

Pos: CM

Age: 35

Apps(Goals): 52(3)

8

The signing of Michael Doyle looked a stop-gap solution while the team bedded in to League Two football, remarkably, Doyle has featured in nearly every game and looks set to continue for at least the start of next season at a higher-level. While he clearly has his limitations – with his increasing loss of pace starting to show – the impact he has on this team is perhaps more keenly felt when he's not in the side. We look less committed, less able to battle our way to tight victories without him, Doyle has been one of our most important players this season.

Kyle Finn

Pos: LM

Age: 18

Apps(Goals): 1(0)

35

With a debut appearance in the League Cup under his belt, Kyle Finn will be pleased with his progress this season. Appears to be a skilful wide player who is fleet of foot, Finn seemed to be lacking the physicality required to make more of a concerted bid for regular first-team football during his cameo against Blackburn Rovers in August. By all reports, Finn is one of the more talented youngsters at the club, we could be seeing slightly more of him next year – again, in cup competitions.

Jodi Jones

Pos: R/LM

Age: 19

Apps(Goals): 22(5)

11

Right from his hat-trick on the opening day, it has been painfully obvious that Jodi Jones was far too good for League Two. Whereas the year before he ran into blind alleys and became predictable in his attempts to get weak shots away on his left foot, Jones immediately looked more purposeful and direct, possessing a greater array of options with his final ball. The big 'what if?' of this season is had Jones not been injured from November onwards, would we have made automatic promotion. That injury though probably means we'll keep hold of our star player next season.

Liam Kelly

Pos: CM

Age: 27

Apps(Goals): 38(1)

6

Brought in to provide us with further presence in midfield to complement Michael Doyle, that Doyle-Kelly midfield axis saw us with the handbrake on for a long period of the season. Kelly's lack of range and vision in his passing left us struggling to play through teams sitting deep against us. However, he really came to the fore in the play-offs as a more aggressive, closing-down midfielder, but will probably become Doyle's longer-term replacement – albeit, as someone seemingly more serene and composed, but less of a winner, in how they approach the game.

Devon Kelly-Evans

Pos: RM/AM Age: 20 Apps(Goals): 17(1)

22

For a period, this looked set to be a breakthrough year for Devon Kelly-Evans. A goal on his home debut against Exeter followed by an extended run in the side, where his energy and willing running seemed to facilitate Nazon and Jones' creativity suggested that he had a role to play. However, he's struggled to reclaim his place since dropping out of the team around November and has since been allowed to leave. Appeared to be the type of wide player who is more of a runner than a creator, with League One looking to be too high a level for his current ability.

Jordan Maguire-Drew

Pos: LM Age: 19 Apps(Goals): 4(0)

17

Jordan Maguire-Drew went very quickly from promising debutant to being completely frozen out of the first-team picture. The winger, nominally signed as Jodi Jones' replacement, looked a skilful dribbler who had the ability to play a useful role in the side under the right management. After some promising early appearances, Maguire-Drew put in a poor performance in the home defeat to Accrington and was never seen since – except in celebration photos at Wembley. Another example of a January signing made without considering what role they'd play in the side.

Callum Maycock

Pos: CM Age: 19 Apps(Goals): 5(0)

28

Callum Maycock may well have felt that this was a season where he'd have a chance to make a concerted bid for a place in the first-team squad, having looked the 4th choice option in midfield behind Ben Stevenson heading into the campaign. A calm and composed defensive midfielder who has looked comfortable in the first-team when called upon, Maycock has seen his position in the squad usurped by the more dynamic Jordan Shipley and Tom Bayliss. Maycock is still young, but next season could be important year in his development as a senior player – possibly by going out on loan.

Kyel Reid

Pos: LM Age: 29 Apps(Goals): 14(0)

32

After trying to walk out of his contract in the summer, there didn't look to be a path back to Coventry City for Kyel Reid. A positive loan spell at Colchester seemed to suggest that a permanent move there was on the cards, instead, Reid was brought back in from the cold – seemingly down to other transfers falling through in January. Reid made a positive impact upon returning – mainly from the bench – providing us with a direct runner and crosser of the ball that our forwards had previously lacked. Has redeemed himself somewhat, but his departure frees up space for new signings.

Bilal Sayoud**Pos:** LM**Age:** 20**Apps(Goals):** 1(0)**29**

Signed alongside Jodi Jones and Vladimir Gadzhev, Bilal Sayoud hasn't made the impact on the first-team that Tony Mowbray probably would have been expecting at this stage when he brought him in to the club. A decent-looking player in the under-23s but doesn't seem to have done quite enough to earn a chance at first-team level and has since been released by the club.

Jordan Shipley**Pos:** LM/CM**Age:** 19**Apps(Goals):** 41(6)**26**

Quietly stepped up into an important role in the first-team – especially for his set-piece deliveries – over the course of the season. While Shipley's more natural position appears to be as a central midfielder, he has looked more than comfortable as something of a thoughtful left-midfield player who helps keep the shape of the side in both an attacking and defensive sense. Just how far he can develop remains to be seen, but it feels like with his energy and ability to strike a ball, we can look forward to seeing him make a bigger impact over the coming years.

Ben Stevenson**Pos:** CM**Age:** 20**Apps(Goals):** 12(1)**31**

Mark Robins never seemed to trust Ben Stevenson, which was made clear via the summer signings of Liam Kelly and Michael Doyle. However, the ascent of Tom Bayliss this season has shown that Robins is willing to promote young talent provided they take opportunities that come their way, and Stevenson was probably guilty this season of not stamping his mark on the side during the rare appearances he made. Now under contract at Wolves and having enjoyed a decent loan spell with Colchester, Stevenson should have a decent future in the game ahead of him nonetheless.

Peter Vincenti**Pos:** RM**Age:** 30**Apps(Goals):** 29(3)**7**

It has only been during brief periods this season that Peter Vincenti has shown the kind of impact that he is capable of. An ungainly presence on the right-wing with a habit of giving the ball away sloppily or diving clumsily into challenges, Vincenti has been a hard player to love. However, his height and experience have shown at times to be useful attributes for us in scoring goals from crosses and set-pieces and providing sturdiness down the right flank. He may well have a role to play next season, but it is likely to be a limited one.

Stuart Beavon**Pos: ST****Age: 33****Apps(Goals): 18(0)****16**

Showed towards the end of last season that he had a role to play as an experienced figurehead in attack, however, Stuart Beavon's body has completely failed him with fitness issues limiting his availability and ability to make any impact on the pitch. There were warning signs during his first six months with us that his body was on the wane, making the decision to hand him a two-year contract last summer frankly bizarre, even without the benefit of hindsight. We may well have to buy his contract out this summer to free up funds to sign other players.

Maxime Biamou**Pos: ST****Age: 26****Apps(Goals): 49(9)****9**

Biamou's early appearances did not look promising, as he struggled to keep up with the pace of the game. Over the course of the season, Biamou has developed into a key presence in attack, with his work-rate, aerial ability and link play vital in the form of Marc McNulty from November onwards. The biggest weakness in his game is his finishing, although the goals began to flow in the final months of the season, suggesting that there may be better to come. Given his importance to the side now, he will surely start next season as first-choice.

Jonson Clarke-Harris**Pos: ST****Age: 22****Apps(Goals): 21(4)****18**

The striker brought in in January to add another goalscorer to the side, Jonson Clarke-Harris' subsequent record has to be considered disappointing. He is a player with all the attributes – pace, strength, skill, a powerful left foot – to be devastating but his decision-making massively lets him down. For a period, it looked like Clarke-Harris was going to overcome a slow start to emerge as a big player for the run-in, but he seemed to lose his way. Set to sign permanently, a full pre-season could make a big difference as he has shown previously in his career that he can play well in League One.

Marc McNulty**Pos: ST****Age: 24****Apps(Goals): 52(28)****10**

Looked to be a dud signing after scoring just once in his first 11 appearances, however, a run of 12 in his next 15 turned that sentiment on its head. At first, it looked like McNulty was a confidence player in front of goal, but he has increasingly showed this season with his work-rate and link play that he is so much more than just a penalty area striker. A fairly underwhelming previous record at League One level gives him something to prove next season, although it appears that we will at first have to resist any interest that comes in for him – likely to be at the top end of League One.

Duckens Nazon**Pos: ST/AM****Age: 23****Apps(Goals): 24(8)****18**

A maverick talent who from his very first touches of the ball in a Coventry City shirt made it delightfully obvious that he was going to be fun to watch. The kind of flair player who seems to split opinions because of a perceived laziness. Nazon more than made up for it with some absurd long-range efforts – many at crucial times in games – along with his vision to pick out passes no-one else in the squad would dream of making. Appeared to have been frozen out at the end by Robins, which put a sour note on a joyful half-season at the club.

Jordan Ponticelli**Pos: ST****Age: 18****Apps(Goals): 26(6)****38**

There were some ludicrous expectations of Ponticelli heading into the season, based mainly on goals scored for the under-18 side. It has taken more time than many were expecting, but Ponticelli eventually made his mark on the first-team. Hardly the most complete of centre-forwards, but Ponticelli is arguably the best out-and-out finisher in the squad – ahead of even McNulty. Each of the goals he's scored this season have been case studies in goal poacher technique, coupled with his willingness to run himself into the ground for the side, he could do well next season – possibly out on loan.

Kwame Thomas**Pos: ST****Age: 21****Apps(Goals): 1(0)****14**

Having made a positive impact during our ill-fated relegation season, Kwame Thomas looked like someone who was worth at least handing a chance to establish himself in the side this year. However, it seemed apparent very quickly that Mark Robins simply didn't fancy Kwame Thomas and he was shipped out on loan – and then permanently – to Solihull Moors, where he's managed four goals in 23 appearances at National League level, which possibly suggests that Robins was justified in his lack of faith in Kwame Thomas.

Key Stats



Appearances

	All Competitions	League
Grimmer	53	44
McNulty	52	42
Doyle	52	42
Biamou	49	39



Goals

	All Competitions	League
McNulty	28	23
Biamou	9	5
Nazon	8	6
Bayliss	6	5
Shipley	6	4
Ponticelli	6	3



Assists

	All Competitions	League
McNulty	12	6
Jones	7	5
Biamou	5	5
Shipley	5	4



Goals Involved In

	All Competitions	League
McNulty	40	29
Biamou	14	10
Jones	12	10
Nazon	12	9

Most Used Team



*Based on appearances in all competitions

Season Review



Welcome To League Two

Despite an abject previous season that ended with relegation, victory in the Checktrade Trophy final, followed by an uplift in form after the re-appointment of Mark Robins as manager suggested that maybe the negative multiplier of decline could be reversed in League Two.

The victory in the Checktrade Trophy final, with goals from academy graduates Gael Bigirimana and George Thomas, suggested that the way forward was with a young and exciting team built around local talents such as Lee Burge in goal, Jordan Willis, Dion Kelly-Evans and Ryan Haynes in defence, Ben Stevenson and Gael Bigirimana in midfield, and George Thomas continuing to develop into a confident goalscorer. Although Gael Bigirimana and George Thomas were tempted elsewhere, it was apparent from very early in the transfer window

that Mark Robins wasn't going to build around that core in his plan to get us out of League Two at the first attempt.

The arrivals of experienced midfielders Michael Doyle and Liam Kelly were perhaps the biggest statements of intent in Mark Robins' squad-building. The aim appeared to be to call upon experience in order to hit the ground running in League Two. Unlike previous seasons following relegation, there was a fresh energy and intent around the club, hoping to avoid moments such as the home defeat to Grimsby after relegation from the Premier League and the 4-1 away loss to Shrewsbury after relegation from the Championship.

It was an almost complete overhaul of the squad, which saw eight new players make their debut on the opening day of the season and a

further two from the bench. The marquee signing appeared to be Marc McNulty, a bit-part player at Sheffield United over the previous three seasons but had shown his quality as a goalscorer at League Two level during a loan spell with Portsmouth. With few other players in the squad looking likely to register large numbers of goals, it was expected that McNulty would have to be shining light of this new-look Coventry City.

However, the opening day heralded the importance of a player many had few expectations of following an underwhelming previous campaign spent most on the bench – Jodi Jones.

Jones' performance during the opening day victory over Notts County would go down in the pantheon of early season performances from Coventry City players where it becomes immediately apparent that this is their season. It was an even game, but one that was decided by the knife-through-hot-butter skill, pace, and – importantly – finishing ability that Jones demonstrated on that day.

Whereas before, we had known that Jodi Jones was capable of beating his marker, there was rarely a feeling that he was going to do anything meaningful afterwards. That opening day performance demonstrated a level of purpose and intent that looked to be a game-changer not just for that game but for the season ahead.

While it often takes a defeat after relegation to demonstrate the type of performance required to get results at the new level, the performance in victory of this new Coventry City side highlighted the quality differential between Leagues One and Two, with the Sky Blues appearing to fail to string together more than three passes in the second-half.

In a low-quality first-half, the opening goal came when the ungainly right-winger Peter Vincenti took a goal-kick down and shuffled the ball out to Jodi Jones on the edge of the penalty area. The Notts County defence – clearly not expecting Jones to attempt an effort on goal – allowed our winger the time and space to make up his mind, and he chose to calmly place the ball into the far corner of the goal, 1-0.

The second-half saw the quality of football take a further turn for the worse, but neither side particularly looked like scoring. As the game wore on and Notts County were forced to chase the result, a simple counter-attack saw substitute Maxime Biamou roll the ball towards Jones, who turned and twisted past a defender and then slotted home his second of the day between the goalkeeper's legs.

Mark Robins then introduced the recent loan signing of unknown Wolves reserve forward Duckens Nazon, and it was quickly apparent that we had a maverick on our hands. A player of unnecessary embellishes at a strange half-pace, daring defenders to second-guess his intentions, Nazon bamboozled the Notts County defence during another counter-attack before laying the ball off for Jones to complete his hat-trick and round-off a 3-0 opening day win.

In the ensuing League Cup tie against Tony Mowbray's Blackburn Rovers, Nazon further demonstrated his potential to be a key player for us this season as he dragged a second-string Sky Blues side into the game against superior opposition in a 3-1 defeat. Nonetheless, the gulf in quality on show between ourselves and a League One side was depressingly large, a reminder of our newly-diminished status.

A double-header of games against former managers continued, with our next league game against Russell Slade's Grimsby Town side.

It seemed befitting of Slade's disastrous spell in charge of the Sky Blues that the opening goal would come from a mishap from one of his key signings for us, Nathan Clarke. Clarke rolled the ball with his feet to his keeper after the referee had awarded a free-kick, Marc McNulty opportunistically intercepted the pass and put the ball into the back of the net with Grimsby appealing in vain (although probably rightfully so) that the free-kick hadn't been taken.

We then casually saw the game out, helped by Jack Grimmer heading home a Liam Kelly corner to make the scoreline more comfortable. It was the performance of a side that was set to win games on a consistent basis, keeping things tight but capable of taking opportunities that fell their way and then proceeding to choke the life out of the rest of the contest.

The midfield core of Michael Doyle and Liam Kelly in particular looked set to be important for us. While neither were particularly dynamic ball-players, both were adept at reading second-balls in midfield while also using their physicality to make their presences felt in the centre of the park. With Jodi Jones out wide, Duckens Nazon to introduce from the bench, and Marc McNulty as the goal-poacher we looked to have the attacking quality to make a plan built around keeping things tight elsewhere an effective one.

The key though was avoiding presenting opportunities to our opponents at our end of the pitch, something that didn't happen in the following home game against Newport County.

A sluggish first-half from was punished early in the second when Liam O'Brien in goal misread a daisy-cutter from Newport's Reece Cole to concede our first league goal of the season.

Despite Robins changing things up later on with the introductions of Ben Stevenson and new signing Tony Andreu in midfield to offer a greater ability to move the ball through midfield, we found ourselves unable to break down a determined defence and thus lost our first league game of the season.

The away trip to Yeovil followed a similar script – a sluggish opening, another goalkeeping howler from Liam O'Brien, and a failure to carve open clear-cut chances. This time, Yeovil made extra sure of their win with a searing second goal from their forward Olufela Olomola.

Having avoided an immediate nasty welcome to the division with victories in the first two games of the season, defeats to two of League Two's smallest clubs provided that reminder that perceived reputation and status are no guarantors of victory.

While there was at least the caveat of the two defeats having been influenced by goalkeeping howlers. There were areas for concern nonetheless, particularly in attack, where we appeared to lack a strategy aside from giving the ball to an increasingly marked Jodi Jones.

With a lack of dynamism in the centre of the pitch a result of playing two nominally defensive midfielders together, it felt as if we were playing with the handbrake on.



Playing With The Handbrake On

Despite an unexpectedly entertaining 3-2 defeat in the Checkatrade Trophy to Shrewsbury Town, the goalscoring struggles of the team were apparent none more so than in the 0-0 draw with Chesterfield that followed.

With our opponents having sustained a poor start to the campaign, they were there for the taking. Instead, we looked leaden and overly deliberate in our creative efforts. Worst of all, the best chances of the game fell to our marquee striker signing of the summer, Marc McNulty, who fluffed each and every one of them.

Even in victory over Port Vale, the balance between defence and attack of the side didn't look quite right. A 16-pass move to set Jodi Jones up with an edge of the area effort to decide the contest was an aberrance in a game

where little of note from a footballing perspective took place.

An injury – soon discovered to be season-ending – to attacking midfield spark Tony Andreu proved to be the most notable event of the Port Vale encounter. The French midfielder had looked comfortable on the ball in the handful of appearances he had made, but more importantly, he had a drive and eye for goal – a major missing element in a side featuring Liam Kelly and Michael Doyle in central midfield. Andreu's injury served only to increase the creative and goalscoring burden on Jodi Jones.

The Port Vale win did at least demonstrate what was becoming an increasingly important trait of this side, the ability to see games out after taking the lead. That was in spite of Rod McDonald picking up a red card in

the final 10 minutes of the Port Vale game for a professional foul.

Another performance lacking in creativity came in the following home game against Carlisle, but it was again one where we snuffed out any hope of the opposition winning the game once we had taken the lead.

A poor first-half lacking in opportunities for both sides saw us then quickly move up a gear or two in the second, Liam Kelly played Duckens Nazon in with a slide-rule pass just after half-time, providing the Haitian forward the opportunity, which he emphatically took, to notch his first league goal for the club. Peter Vincenti then scored his own first league goal for the club after benefitting from the penetration Jodi Jones provided on the counter-attack against a stretched Carlisle side forced to chase the game.

Back-to-back wins put us back on track following the wobble caused by the Newport and Yeovil defeats. A crucial factor appeared to be the return of Lee Burge in goal, with the academy product looking increasingly calm and reliable between the sticks. Important too though was that we were reducing the amount of saves Burge had to make, thanks to a stern defence, aided by the form of Jordan Willis and Rod McDonald, who were putting together an impressive central defensive partnership.

A 2-1 defeat to Cambridge was unfortunate, but we were still at a stage of the season where performances were more important than results. It was a game that we dominated, with Duckens Nazon and Jodi Jones creating numerous opportunities for both themselves and their team-mates, only to be denied by an inspired goalkeeping performance from Cambridge's David Forde.

Due to a failure though to defend two crosses into the box – in between Nazon's excellent equaliser early in the second-half – we failed to take what would have been a deserved three points from the game.

It was a result that we would quickly put to bed, when the then-league-leaders Exeter City came to the Ricoh Arena. Injuries further hampered Mark Robins' team selection – already without long-term absentee Tony Andreu and Marc McNulty having picked up a knock too – after Stuart Beavon picked up an injury in the warm-up, forcing Devon Kelly-Evans into his first start for the side. To make matters worse, Peter Vincenti was then forced-off early on in the proceedings, forcing Maxime Biamou to come on in his stead.

The introductions of Biamou and Kelly-Evans though quickly formed a front four, alongside Duckens Nazon and Jodi Jones, that proved highly effective. Biamou, after some less-than-encouraging opening appearances after stepping up from non-league football, proved to be an excellent focal point in attack, winning headers and linking the play effectively. Devon Kelly-Evans served to add a tireless runner to the attacking mix, ploughing a furrow for Jodi Jones and Duckens Nazon to operate in.

After a characteristically tight first-half of few opportunities, Jodi Jones' cross was turned into his own net by Exeter's Troy Brown to hand us the lead. From then on, it was typical game management-mode from us as we snuffed out, more-or-less, any attacking threat from Exeter, with Devon Kelly-Evans securing a coup de grace after an encouraging full debut by bundling another Jodi Jones cross in for his first league goal for the club.

An away trip to Swindon Town next up was always going to be an important acid test for any Coventry City team – Swindon having been a bogey team for us over the past decade. After Maxime Biamou spurned a couple of excellent opportunities when put through one-on-one, Swindon took the lead thanks to an excellent volley from their striker Luke Norris, seeming to set the stage for another hard luck encounter at the County Ground.

The character of this side soon became apparent, Michael Doyle, on a rare surge forward from midfield, turned in a Jodi Jones cross to level matters soon after falling behind. Doyle then upped his credentials as the nasty, cajoling presence in midfield that we'd lacked over the years, as he earned his opposing midfield enforcer, James Dunne, a red card during an incident that looked very much like Doyle may have bit Dunne on the rear-end.

Duckens Nazon then added to his own mythos by scoring a sensational long-range effort soon after that red card to put us into the lead. It was the first points we had taken all season from a losing position, laying to rest, for one year at least, Swindon's status as a bogey side for us – maybe there really was something different about this iteration of Coventry City.

The confidence was starting to flow, helped in large part by having a settled side with a functioning front four of Nazon, Jones, Kelly-Evans and Biamou and a rock-solid defence and midfield. Jones and Nazon in particular were looking like exciting attacking talents worthy of paying the entrance fee alone.

That swagger was certainly on show during the victory over Crewe Alexandra at the Ricoh Arena, with Jones setting up Nazon for the game's

only goal – aided in no small part by a lucky deflection off the corner flag.

It should have been a more comfortable scoreline, but it was a comfortable win nonetheless, thanks to a defence rapidly developing a reputation as the sternest in the division.

Three wins in a row had put us in a position to move top of the division with a win over a mid-table Barnet side in front of the Sky cameras, with a packed away end starting to believe that this was a Coventry City side capable of not just challenging for, but winning, promotion. Only for a flat contest to once again demonstrate the attacking limitations of this side.

Failing to take that opportunity was further punished the following week as we were thoroughly outclassed against a highly-polished Accrington Stanley side. Although Stanley had started the season in strong form, their standing in the game meant that any defeat was going to be hard to take for most Coventry City fans, especially given just how superior they looked to us on the day.

Another humbling defeat came in the home game against Forest Green, which seemed to follow a familiar script to the earlier losses against Newport and Yeovil. This time it was Lee Burge committing a glaring error in goal, as he misread a long-range effort from Keanu Marsh-Brown to cost us the game.

While it would be unfair to blame Burge for the result – given the failure of the rest of the side to both create and take opportunities against one of the division's worst sides – the mistake came at a bad time for our keeper, who was starting to win a level of trust from

the fans that he'd never previously had since breaking into the side nearly three seasons prior.

The confidence in the side that had been flowing during the victory over Crewe just over two weeks earlier looked completely bereft, as we returned to the leaden, ponderous football that we had seen earlier in the season. Quickly too, an edginess in the stands had suddenly swept over the Ricoh Arena – perhaps as a result of having recently lost to a side of the stature of Accrington Stanley and falling behind to another low-status club in Forest Green.

That anxiety of another Coventry City side failing to live up to its potential was encapsulated via a pitch invader late on in the Forest Green game. It seemed to be a massive overreaction to back-to-back defeats, but highlighted the fear that the prospect of not getting out of League Two quickly would engender around the club.

A third consecutive defeat was at least avoided against Colchester United in the following home game, but a failure to create much of note – especially in the final 15 minutes against 10 men – made it four games in a row without scoring, an indictment of the cautious approach with this side that Mark Robins was taking.

An away trip to free-scoring Luton Town side next up didn't seem to hold much hope for us. However, an early goal from the misfiring Marc McNulty – from a deep and early Jodi Jones cross – ended the goalless run for the side, and set us on the path to one of the most memorable wins of the season.

Having attempted to 'manage' the rest of the game – involving those dark arts of football such as timewasting, feigning injuries and niggling away at

the opposition's sense of rhythm – Jordan Shipley stepped up to announce himself as a first-team player. The academy player had made a quiet transition to the first-team, building a reputation as the best set-piece taker at the club, but had made little impact. That was until he stepped up to take a late free-kick in the Luton game and caught one of the division's best goalkeepers in Marek Stech completely unawares by bending the set-piece perfectly over the wall and into the top corner of the goal, right in front of the travelling away fans – cue pandemonium.

Duckens Nazon then scored a typical Duckens Nazon goal – jinking, twisting and turning, seeming to have done one trick too many, before curling the ball perfectly into the back of the net – to round off a comfortable 3-0 away victory over the pre-season title favourites.

The FA Cup First Round game at home to National League Maidenhead proved to be an opportunity for another academy graduate to demonstrate their ability to make an impact at first-team level – Jordan Ponticelli.

The striker had built up a cult following due to his incredible goalscoring record at under-18 level at a time when the first-team were struggling to score, yet had failed to make much of an impact during the handful of substitute appearances Mark Robins had given him. Ponticelli showed his quality as an out-and-out finisher against Maidenhead, first, showing excellent movement to find himself in space for a Jack Grimmer pull-back to open the scoring, then calmly poking home a rebound from a Jodi Jones effort to seal the win.

Confidence was starting to increase again, but that was then dented by

another goalless home league game against Mansfield. It was a rare performance where we had been outclassed by an opponent, but our defensive sternness meant that it took a brilliant 25-yard effort from Mansfield's Alex MacDonald to decide the game late on.

The most frustrating thing about this team though was the inconsistency. We proceeded to follow up that sub-par performance against Mansfield with an impressive come-from-behind win away at Lincoln City.

A poor first-half showing gave way to Jodi Jones and Duckens Nazon stepping up to the fore once more and wrestling the game back in our favour. First, Jones curled an audacious effort from the corner of the box inside the far post to level matters, then Nazon hammered home a rebound from a Jones double-effort to put us in a winning position that we then saw out.

It was another performance that marked Jodi Jones out as possibly the best player at that time operating at League Two level. Having already lost Tony Andreu to a season-ending injury though, it was another piece of rotten luck on the injury-front that saw Jones pick up a season-ender in the 1-1 draw with Stevenage that put our promotion hopes, already undermined by inconsistency, into genuine jeopardy.



Life Without Jodi

Without Jodi Jones as an option, something was going to have to change about the way the team was set-up. So much of our play went through Jones that it seemed inconceivable that we could immediately get back up and running again without our most important player, with the January transfer window – five weeks away – looking important in sourcing a replacement. Until then, we would have to soldier on in damage limitation mode.

For the Crawley game that came in the immediate aftermath of Jones' injury, Robins altered the tactics away from the 4-4-1-1 system that had been played for much of the campaign, towards an experimental 3-4-3 set-up. The thinking was obvious, robbed of the one out-and-out winger in the squad, perhaps we would be best off playing without any.

The logic behind the tactical switch was counteracted by a disjointed and sloppy first-half performance against Crawley, where it looked as if the team hadn't spent much time in training learning the new system. Confusion in the defence led to a wide-open space for Crawley to sear through on a counter-attack and hand themselves a 1-0 half-time lead. The early signs of life without Jodi Jones looked ominous.

The introduction of Ben Stevenson in midfield for the second-half saw Mark Robins switch to a more orthodox system, which seemed to make a big difference. It was the contribution of another academy-produced player of whom big things had been expected of this season, Ryan Haynes, which earned the team a point. His run and cross was expertly taken down by

Duckens Nazon and squared for Marc McNulty to fire home to make it 1-1.

The equaliser was Marc McNulty's second goal in as many games, having looked in danger of flopping since his summer arrival. Whether it was the cautious style of play, or a lack of confidence, McNulty hadn't really looked like a striker who was going to score a significant amount of goals. If we were to recover from the loss of Jodi Jones, Marc McNulty stepping up was going to go a long way towards that.

The Scot was on the scoresheet again the following weekend as the Sky Blues once again made light work of non-league opposition at the Ricoh Arena in the FA Cup, this time Boreham Wood. Goals from Duckens Nazon and Jordan Shipley either side of McNulty's strike meant that Coventry City were heading into the FA Cup Third Round for the first time since the 2013/14 season – we were subsequently awarded with a home tie against Premier League stalwarts Stoke City at the Ricoh Arena, which looked like it would fail to capture the imagination.

A trip away to lowly Morecambe looked set to be a good opportunity to gain a needed three points to kick-start our promotion campaign. In the event, we failed to impose ourselves on the game in any conceivable manner.

Morecambe carved open our defence time and time again and were rewarded with two goals having been barely threatened at their end of the pitch.

It looked to be back to the drawing board for Mark Robins, with a six-week injury to Liam Kelly robbing him of yet another key player. Ben Stevenson, who had struggled to reclaim his place in the side after a breakthrough previous season, put in a particularly poor showing at Morecambe. A lack of

alternative options meant that he would have to do until the January transfer window.

That was the thinking at least until the surprise inclusion of the little-known Tom Bayliss for the following game against Cheltenham. Bayliss quickly proved that he was in the first team for something more than just to make a point to the underperforming Ben Stevenson, with his deflected shot giving the Sky Blues the lead within two minutes. The youngster then put in an increasingly assured performance, competing physically well in central midfield while offering the ability to glide past opposing players, suggesting that he had something about him.

Bayliss' goal wasn't decisive in that Cheltenham game though, a poor showing from the rest of the side between taking the lead and Cheltenham equalising allowed our opponents to build up a considerable head of steam. The mid-table Robins had dictated possession and created multiple openings before their impressive forward Mohamed Eisa tucked home a ball that fell to him kindly in our penalty area.

Duckens Nazon – who had been hung out to dry by Mark Robins in the previous game against Morecambe – produced yet another moment of magic, after his introduction from the bench against Cheltenham to decide the game. It was his telling through ball, controlled expertly by an increasingly confident Marc McNulty that carved open the opposing defence and ultimately won the game.

It was a win, but having found ourselves at the mercy of poor finishing from our opponents, optimism wasn't necessarily high that we could repeat the trick against

promotion-chasing Wycombe. The simple fact of getting those three points though seemed to provide the team with the shot in the arm required to produce a much more assured performance in the final home game before Christmas.

It was a victory aided and abetted first-off by an incredibly fortuitous opening goal from Michael Doyle. The ball fell to him some 35-yards away from goal and he hammered it almost absent-mindedly towards the Wycombe goal, only for it to loop unexpectedly over the goalkeeper to the gleeful shock of the Ricoh Arena faithful – Doyle, of course, celebrated it like he meant it.

Marc McNulty then further demonstrated his increased confidence as a striker, after he received a long pass from Peter Vincenti which sent him through on goal, proceeding to bamboozle his defender with a display of skill to drive towards goal and stroke the ball home. It was a comfortable 2-0 scoreline against a surprisingly subdued opposition heading into half-time.

That was until Wycombe lumped the ball forward from a free-kick from inside their own half and the deflection fell fortuitously to their defender Dan Scarr, who volleyed the ball into the roof of the net in an almost nonchalant manner. However, it was a goal against the run of play and there seemed little reason to panic.

Wycombe then set about taking something from the game right from the off in the second-half. The wrecking-ball presence of Adebayo Akinfenwa up front for Wycombe attempted to win a penalty for his side with a ludicrous tumble in the box. Jordan Willis failed to heed the warning, committing more of a cast-iron foul against Akinfenwa to allow

Wycombe to level the scores from the spot. In the blink of an eye, a comfortable 2-0 scoreline had been squandered.

Marc McNulty had other ideas, repeating Akinfenwa's trick by taking a tumble to the floor at the other end to win us a penalty. McNulty confidently tucked home the spot-kick to make it six goals in six appearances, continuing his purple patch. While McNulty still looked like far from the most clinical of strikers, his work-rate and ability to put misses out-of-mind meant that he was now becoming an increasingly reliable source of goals for us.

After seeing the win out against Wycombe, an away trip to Port Vale on Boxing Day looked a great chance to make it a three-game winning streak and breathe new life into our promotion bid.

A flat performance, no doubt related to Mark Robins' bizarre decision to play Jack Grimmer as a right winger rather than at full-back, was punished via a late goal from Port Vale. The air once again let out of our promotion bid.

The rapid-fire nature of the Christmas fixture list gave us an opportunity to recover quickly from that defeat, which we did – thanks to another McNulty goal – away at Carlisle in a scrappy performance. Marc McNulty then further demonstrated his newfound confidence in curling home a wonderful effort from outside the area on New Year's Day against Chesterfield to decide yet another close game.

We were becoming less and less Jodi Jones' team and more and more Marc McNulty's. Perhaps the more direct style of play through the centre of the pitch – aided and abetted by the increasingly important aerial and link

play of Maxime Biamou up front – that allowed McNulty to come to the fore, or perhaps it was simply a case of a player finally settling down to life at a new club, but we were starting to look a more effective side despite losing a player who was among the division's very best.

Nonetheless, few were expecting the newfound effectiveness of this team to mean much against even a beleaguered Stoke City in the FA Cup. When Jordan Willis put the team ahead from a corner mid-way in the first-half, followed by several chances to then add to the scoreline, there was suddenly belief.

When Willis allowed Stoke back into the game in the second-half, clumsily tripping the Egyptian winger Ramadan Sobhi in the penalty area, with Charlie Adam duly converting the spot-kick. The script looked set for valiant defeat from that point onwards, until Jack Grimmer hit a pot-shot from the edge of the penalty area on a rare foray forward to put us back ahead.

Thanks to some valiant, body-on-the-line defending in the closing stages, we held on to one of our biggest FA Cup results for at least a decade and kicked life and character into a season that had been devoid of a moment of lift-off that could galvanise the club. While a draw in the following round away at MK Dons wasn't the glamour tie many were hoping for, it provided an opportunity for a bumper away following to get behind the side.

Distracted perhaps by exploits in the FA Cup, we stumbled to a loss at fellow promotion chasers Exeter City in the following league game, with Lee Burge's clearance charged down by Exeter midfielder Ryan Harley in the first-half to decide the game.

A home clash against another promotion contender in Swindon Town – then possessing the division's best away record – was going to be an acid test of our credentials to last the course in a promotion race, as we aimed to avoid the kind of collapses we had sustained in recent seasons under Tony Mowbray and Steve Pressley.

It was Maxime Biamou – our hard-working and effective, yet goalless, centre-forward – who stepped up with a stunning, thunderously-struck half-volley early in the game to put us ahead. It was a lead that was soon doubled from the spot by our star striker Marc McNulty that had us 2-0 and cruising in an important game.

Swindon resisted a spell of pressure where we threatened to make it three, before halving the deficit before half-time when a cross from the left side of the pitch towards several waiting Swindon players was duly converted by Ollie Banks to make it a contest again.

It took some heroic defending, involving two goal-line scrambles, to preserve our lead, before Marc McNulty capitalised on a Swindon Town error to strike from outside the area and seal the three points in an important game.

The trip to Milton Keynes the following weekend became a chance to celebrate a Coventry City side that fans were increasingly feeling proud of. With a rock-solid defence, the leadership of Michael Doyle in midfield alongside the increasingly assured Tom Bayliss, and a strike partnership in Marc McNulty and Maxime Biamou that was increasing in confidence in each week, an FA Cup tie against a struggling League One side held little fear.

MK Dons though put that newfound confidence to the test with a dominant first-half performance, demonstrating

the gulf between even the bottom of League One and the top of League Two, unfortunate not to head into half-time with the lead.

The Sky Blues seemed to take the cue from the goalless first-half that we were going to have to step up a gear or two to deliver a moment to celebrate in front of our bumper away following. Marc McNulty and Maxime Biamou in particular were vital in giving us a foothold in the game, with their work-rate and hassling of an MK Dons side looking to play out from the back allowing us to push further up the pitch.

A neat piece of play between Tom Bayliss – being played out of position on the right of midfield to allow the fully-fit Liam Kelly back into the side – and Marc McNulty teed Maxime Biamou up to scuff an effort trickling past the goal-line and deliver the moment every Sky Blues fan in attendance had been waiting for.

Our opponents laboured to get back into the game, but it was the Sky Blues that looked more likely to score the next goal, with Liam Kelly and Ben Stevenson both coming close to rounding off another memorable away trip to Milton Keynes for the club. The one goal was enough to decide the game and extend the run in the FA Cup, earning an away trip to Premier League Brighton.

The win also continued the sense of momentum that we were building, finally looking like a consistent, winning unit. Those qualities were in evidence as the Sky Blues routinely dismissed a mid-table Cambridge United side at the Ricoh Arena just days after the MK Dons victory. Goals from Marc McNulty, Jordan Shipley and Michael Doyle further emphasised

the increasing confidence and cohesion that this team were gaining.



The Trouble With January Signings

It had once been inconceivable that we could improve as a team without Jodi Jones. The form though of Marc McNulty and Maxime Biamou up front and the emergences of Tom Bayliss and Jordan Shipley in midfield gave us what was increasingly becoming a highly-effective and functional team unit.

Nonetheless, an injection of quality in the January transfer window still felt necessary, especially following the exit of Duckens Nazon at the start of the month. Josh Barrett and Jordan Maguire-Drew arrived on loan early in the transfer window to supply additional wide options, but what looked to be the key signing was striker Jonson Clarke-Harris – boasting the calibre of someone who had been a record signing for Rotherham in their recent years in the Championship.

It was vital though that Mark Robins found the balance between making the most of that injection of quality and quantity from the transfer business, while maintaining what was a functioning dynamic in the starting XI.

Further adding to the new wealth of options presented to Mark Robins was the return to fitness of Liam Kelly, along with the return of Kyel Reid to the fold after a loan move at Colchester United. Having practically been forced due to a lack of options into picking a side that eventually became a winning one, Mark Robins could now afford to leave some important players on the bench, or out of the side completely.

Robins resisted the temptation to change things up too drastically heading into the away trip to a lowly Forest Green side. Nonetheless, the shoehorning of Tom Bayliss into a wide

position, with Josh Barrett equally uncomfortable on the other flank, struggled to replicate the level of performance that we had seen the previous week at MK Dons.

Forest Green capitalised on a defensive mix-up to take a deserved lead in the first-half. In a second-half showing that was little better, the Sky Blues were then fortunate to have been granted an opportunity to level the game up from the spot, which Marc McNulty duly converted.

Just as we looked like regrouping from a sluggish opening hour of the game, Forest Green's Lee Collins smacked home a sensational effort from the outside of the area to put his side back into the lead. Despite the late introduction of Jonson Clarke-Harris for his debut, we offered little to salvage a point from the game.

Despite it having been a reasonably positive season thus far, a club of the stature of Forest Green completing a league double over us was always going to go down as an indictment of the club's decline. With Accrington Stanley – albeit as one of the teams pushing for promotion – coming the following week, there was every chance for a double salvo of league doubles against the smallest clubs in the Football League to be completed.

In preparation for the Accrington Stanley game, the club ran a 'Community Day' event, which saw thousands of free tickets given away to local school children. It provided a chance to win over a generation of new fans, but there was always the danger that having so many first-time attendees would engender a stilted atmosphere – especially when many would have presumed that a club like Coventry City should easily be beating a club like Accrington Stanley.

Our hopes of taking something from an important game for both our season and in boosting attendances were dealt a significant blow due to an illness that spread throughout the squad around the day of the match, leading to the absences of key players in defence and in goal.

The game started off badly when Accrington's winger Callum Johnson tore apart a rusty-looking Dion Kelly-Evans – starting his first league game of the season – to tee up his fellow wide-man Jordan Clark to hand Accrington an early lead which they never looked like surrendering.

After creating little, despite throwing on Jonson Clarke-Harris and Kyel Reid in a desperate move to stoke the attack, Accrington doubled their lead in the 60th minute. Game over. Back-to-back-defeats. A drop from 4th to 9th.

Making matters worse was that Mark Robins appeared to have lost a sense of what his strongest team was. So many new and different options had been presented to him in a short space of time that it was clear that he was having a hard time making sense of it and there was increasingly little time to get it right.

The away trip to Colchester United that followed seemed to indicate that this was yet another Coventry City side set to fail to seize another excellent chance to win promotion. A poor start, punished by a successfully-converted penalty for Colchester, gave way to an improved showing and an equaliser. Despite building a head of steam enough to create chances for a winner, we were caught on the counter late-on to lose the game.

The defeat, and the deflating nature of it, left confidence at a low ebb heading into the FA Cup tie with Brighton. With

our hosts in decent form at the time in the Premier League, this looked to be the end of the line for our FA Cup run.

Mark Robins' experimentation with starting Jonson Clarke-Harris – who had impressed from the bench against Colchester – and Jordan Shipley in central midfield with Tom Bayliss on the wing left us on the back foot for much of the first-half against Brighton, with players struggling to figure out what to do in both an attacking and defensive sense.

Brighton's record £14.5 million signing Jurgen Locadia gave his club the lead in the 15th minute with a cool finish, after we had been carved open on several occasions already. Brighton added a second from a corner around 20 minutes later, effectively sealing their place in the next round of the cup. A third came in the second-half from another poorly defended cross, rubber-stamping the win for Brighton.

The only real encouragement from the game was Jonson Clarke-Harris scoring his first goal for the club, with an excellent outside-of-the-boot finish to at least give the travelling fans something to celebrate at the end of an unexpectedly extended run in the FA Cup.

Our season though wasn't going to be defined by how far we went in the FA Cup, it was all about whether we would win promotion or not in the league. With an important month of fixtures coming our way – featuring fellow promotion-contenders Mansfield, Wycombe, Lincoln and Luton – the team were facing a decisive period. With no idea of his strongest XI or what formation to play them in, Mark Robins would have to find the answers fast.



The Final Kickstart

Mansfield looked like formidable opponents heading into our trip to Field Mill to play them, just when we desperately needed a win of any kind to kick-start our campaign. Having lost just two of their previous 20 games heading into their meeting with us and with an imperious home record, we were going to have to pull out another classic performance against a promotion-contender to come out with a result.

The game looked set to be following the script that many had been anticipating when Mansfield took the lead early in the first-half. To make matters worse, the goal – a fortuitously deflected free-kick – had come in the aftermath of Jordan Willis picking up a red card for a professional foul. 1-0 and one man down, that familiar sinking feeling that comes with supporting this club had returned with a vengeance.

Somehow, the team grew into the game from that point onwards, with Jonson Clarke-Harris up front looking to have finally gotten up to speed since his January arrival. Those efforts were rewarded when we were awarded a penalty late in the second-half, and with Marc McNulty having been substituted, it was Clarke-Harris who shouldered the burden of taking the spot-kick, and duly scored.

It was a merited and spirited point away to a promotion rival under trying circumstances, even at the time, it felt like just the turning-point that we had been in need of.

That nascent belief would be quickly put to the test, with an away trip to Wycombe Wanderers in the midst of the 'Beast from the East' spout of glacial weather in the UK in early Spring. The conditions served to make

it a turgid contest with both players and fans alike focused more on staying warm than the final result.

In those trying conditions, Tom Bayliss produced one of his typical gliding runs forward late on in the game, before he was scythed down in the box by Wycombe's club bouncer of a centre-back Adam El-Abd. It was another important opportunity from the penalty spot, once again – this time with Marc McNulty stepping up – we took that opportunity. This really was a turning point.

The postponement of the Lincoln City home game meant that the team were now presented with a run of three games out of the next four against relegation contenders, with only a home game against Luton Town breaking up that run. This was now almost the perfect launchpad to nail down our position in the play-offs, if only we could establish an ability to put away the division's lesser lights on a more consistent basis.

Perhaps knowing how presentable the opportunity that lay ahead of us was what engendered a sub-par and sloppy showing against a Barnet side comfortably moored to the bottom of the table. It was the away side at the Ricoh Arena that enjoyed long periods of control of the game and had the game's best chances.

In particular, the strike pairing of Jonson Clarke-Harris and Marc McNulty looked a problem for the side, with neither showing signs of being on the other's wavelength. The irony of the game was that it took a combination of the two to create the game's decisive goal, with Marc McNulty firing a slightly wayward effort towards goal and Clarke-Harris pouncing on it, to hand us the lead –

and victory – with 15 minutes remaining.

After the much-maligned Peter Vincenti put us ahead in the following game against Luton Town – following a ludicrous piece of skill from Ryan Haynes in the build-up – we looked set to be building some genuine momentum. Marc McNulty made it two just before the break from a low free-kick and we really did look set to announce ourselves as promotion contenders.

However, Luton eventually wore us down as we attempted to hang onto the result. They pulled a goal back in a soft manner from a set-piece, before equalising with two minutes remaining from another cross into the box. A gutting way to drop points, but it was still a positive result against one of the division's strongest sides and there were now only two more games against fellow promotion contenders left in the season.

With our following game away at Crewe taking place amidst a gusty, icy blizzard, there was a danger that the conditions could derail our attempts to maintain the sense of momentum behind us. It was a fear that was heightened by several goal-kicks played by stand-in keeper Liam O'Brien straight into the howling, twirling wind that arced threateningly back towards his own goal – it looked set to be a game decided by weather-induced errors.

An emphatic finish early on though from Jonson Clarke-Harris settled the nerves to a degree, although Crewe then proceeded to have the best of the play for the next 15-20 minutes and were rewarded with a goal after Liam O'Brien could only palm a brilliant

reaction save straight into the path of Crewe's Jordan Bowery.

Losing the lead though seemed to stiffen the nerve of this side, we quickly took the cue to step up a couple of gears. In particular, Tom Bayliss asserted his presence onto the game, driving forward with intent from midfield and gliding past Crewe defenders with ease. It was Bayliss who began and finished a move – playing a one-two with the impressive Jonson Clarke-Harris – that put us back ahead, emphasising Bayliss' increasing confidence at first-team level.

There was a bold decision at half-time from Mark Robins to take Bayliss off in favour of Liam Kelly – presumably due to an injury to Bayliss – but with the wind behind us in the second-half, Kelly set the tone for a more aggressive performance in closing down Crewe's defence and forcing several errors that could have made the scoreline more comfortable. Nonetheless, it was an impressive victory given the conditions the game was played in.

With our cushion inside the play-offs only a solitary point with nine games remaining, this wasn't the time to underestimate a desperately out-of-form Grimsby Town side at the Ricoh Arena heading into the following game. A nervy opening period was soon settled down via Peter Vincenti heading in an inch-perfect Jordan Shipley delivery late in the first-half to put us ahead.

Grimsby started the second-half though with the determination to get back into the game, until Tom Bayliss robbed Grimsby's Martyn Woolford around 35-yards from our goal, played the ball to Michael Doyle, who raked a long ball towards Jonson Clarke-Harris, who then took the ball into his

stride before bearing down on goal and teed up Marc McNulty for a tap-in. A near-perfect counter-attacking goal, and one that sucked the life out of a Grimsby side clearly low on confidence.

From that point onwards, the game became a procession for us. Marc McNulty grabbed his second of the game after he was denied point-blank by Grimsby's keeper James McKeown, only for the ball to fall back to him in a perfect position for a headed tap-in. With the forward in the mood for a hat-trick, he soon grabbed it, on the volley, after a Grimsby defender attempted to clear a Kyel Reid cross that had been intended for Maxime Biamou.

A clinical and ruthless 4-0 win against one of the weaker teams in the division, it was the kind of performance and scoreline that earlier in the season we would have struggled to attain.

Importantly, following the constant tactical and personnel changes that the January transfer activity had engendered, Mark Robins looked to have settled on a winning formula.

Rod McDonald alongside the increasingly impressive Dominic Hyam in central defence had formed a good understanding. The balance between the full-backs Ryan Haynes and Jack Grimmer with their respective wide players, Jordan Shipley and Peter Vincenti, looked to be dovetailing nicely. Michael Doyle and Tom Bayliss in central midfield were an excellent combination of experience and youthful exuberance, while Jonson Clarke-Harris and Marc McNulty up front were looking an increasingly effective goalscoring strike-pairing.

Even the players introduced from the bench seemed to be important cogs in

how the team functioned over 90 minutes. Kyel Reid could be introduced to run at tired defences in the final half-hour, while Maxime Biamou was there as a battering ram to pin teams back once they'd had enough trouble with McNulty and Clarke-Harris. Liam Kelly could then come on in midfield to calm things down, snuff out danger in front of the defence and see the result out.

The Easter period, with games against mid-table Newport County and a Yeovil Town side that had already effectively secured safety, looked like a presentable opportunity to not only nail down the play-offs, but to put together a late surge towards the automatic promotion places.

Newport away looked the tougher of the two games, against a physical side with a reputation for upsetting the better teams in the division on a tough pitch. It certainly looked to be the case after Newport took the lead in the first-half from a cross into the box that we failed to deal with. However, the introductions of Kyel Reid and Maxime Biamou from the bench earned us a valuable point, with Biamou tucking home a Reid cross.

Two points dropped but the home game against Yeovil remained an opportunity to move closer to 3rd place than to 8th. We only had to could continue our recent knack of putting away the division's weaker teams at home.

That hope was dented when Yeovil took the lead after Lee Burge flapped at a corner to present their striker Alex Fisher with a tap-in. To make matters worse, Michael Doyle was caught in possession soon after as Yeovil countered with pace and intent to make it 2-0 after 11 minutes. The farce seemed completed when Jack Grimmer

misjudged a header back to Lee Burge to present Yeovil with yet another easy opportunity to score, 3-0 down after just 15 minutes.

The situation that had unfolded in front of us was a real test of nerve and character of both the team and of Mark Robins. For 15 minutes afterwards, the team looked shell-shocked by what had just happened, which forced Mark Robins into an early change, bringing on an extra striker in Maxime Biamou for Peter Vincenti – who was roundly booed off for his involvement in the unfolding catastrophe.

Tactics were swiftly abandoned as the players tried to force their way back into the contest, which led to as much danger at Yeovil's end as it did ours. A failure to reduce the deficit before half-time looked like it would make it difficult to salvage anything from the game.

Nonetheless, Maxime Biamou pulled a goal back after he was set-up by good build-up play between Tom Bayliss and Marc McNulty. With Yeovil demonstrating signs of panic, there was suddenly a sense that it wouldn't take a lot for them to fold. However, Dominic Hyam was beaten for pace on the counter-attack by Yeovil's Francois Zoko, and the three-goal deficit was swiftly restored.

Despite Maxime Biamou scoring a thunderbolt of a second goal to make it 4-2, it was simply a day where everything was coming off for Yeovil, while we would come out of it with nothing to show for the considerable effort being put in. Their substitute forward Sam Surridge added two goals in the final 10 minutes to add a flourish to the farcical nature of the final scoreline, 6-2.

It looked like another troubling loss of nerve, but with an away trip to against fellow promotion-contenders Notts County ahead, there was little time to lick our wounds and feel sorry for ourselves.

It seemed important though to remember that the side that had been obliterated by Yeovil was also one that had gone seven games unbeaten and re-established ourselves in the play-off places. Mark Robins failed to take that in mind, dropping five players from the starting XI for the Notts County game.

It was a tense first-half between two sides struggling for confidence despite being in the play-off places. It was going to be a case of who blinked first to hand the opponent the advantage, which proved to be us, as Notts County's Jonathan Forte gave his side the lead in the 60th minute, glancing in a corner-kick.

There was little indication that we were going to get ourselves back into the contest, until Jordan Ponticelli impudently backheeled a deflection with five minutes left in the game. It led to scenes of pandemonium in the stands as both fans and players thought we had just salvaged a point late-on against a fellow promotion contender – scenes which also seemed to involve Jonson Clarke-Harris being injured by the Sky Blues fans that had made it onto the pitch.

When Notts County proceeded to send the proceeding kick-off straight out of play for a throw-in, there seemed to be little danger. Instead, Jack Grimmer threw possession, literally, away before Liam Kelly attempted to clear the ball, only to send it straight into the path of Shola Ameobi, who teed Forte up for a tap-in. A point won and lost within the space of a minute.

Back-to-back defeats had sent us back to square one with just five games of the season remaining. Our saving grace at that moment in time though was the poor form of fellow play-off contenders Mansfield and Swindon, which meant we were still in poll position to make the play-offs if we could recover our nerve.

Mark Robins decided to experiment further with the side for the following game against Crawley Town, switching to a 4-3-3 formation involving a front three of out-and-out strikers in Marc McNulty, Jonson Clarke-Harris and Jordan Ponticelli. That shift in emphasis seemed to have paid-off when McNulty teed up Ponticelli early on to give us a 1-0 lead.

The drawback of playing strikers as our wide players soon became apparent as Crawley took the initiative, with their full-backs allowed to charge forward relatively unchecked. It allowed Lewis Young, from right-back, to score an equaliser just eight minutes after Ponticelli's opening goal. The game then slowed down to a surreal tempo, despite it being such an important stage of the season for us.

The second-half saw us progressively build up attacking emphasis, without really threatening to regain the lead. That was until Jordan Ponticelli once again demonstrated his natural goalscoring ability to grab his third goal in the space of two games with a strike on the edge of the penalty area that deflected into the far corner. It was a crucial goal that moved us up to 6th with four games remaining.

If we could follow up that win over Crawley with another three points at home to Stevenage, it would then put us tantalisingly close to securing our first ever play-off spot. The game got off to the perfect start when Marc

McNulty caught Stevenage's Tom King in goal completely unawares with a long-range effort in just the second minute of the game. When McNulty quickly made it two after tapping home Jordan Willis' knock-down from a corner, we looked to be sailing to victory.

As if to summarise our season in microcosm though, a simple defensive error – this time, with Rod McDonald miscuing a clearance straight into the path of Stevenage's Alex Revell, who then had a tap-in – raised the prospect of a needless collapse. It was Liam Kelly though that stepped up with a commanding performance in midfield, before scoring our third goal from the edge of the penalty area, that killed that prospect off. Stevenage's Luke Wilkinson then picked up a straight red card minutes later to truly end the game as a contest.

After seeing out the win, the prospect of facing fellow play-off contenders Lincoln City at home seemed less fearsome than it had previously looked. A point would have put both sides in need of just one win from their remaining two games to seal a play-off spot. It was now a game that was a must-not-lose rather than a must-win.

In the event, both teams approached the game with a level of intensity that hadn't been anticipated. Lincoln's Matt Rhead thundered home a goal within the opening minute of the game to send Lincoln's raucous travelling 3,000 fans into a state of delirium.

However, we were level from a rapid counter-attack – which Lincoln's bulking centre-forward Rhead tried to disrupt by first, attempting to foul Lee Burge as he bowled the ball out to Jonson Clarke-Harris, then claiming unsuccessfully for a head injury – with Clarke Harris racing down the left side,

taking on a defender and then teeing up Tom Bayliss to send the ball home from the edge of the penalty area.

The contest seemed to calm down from that point, until Lincoln reclaimed the lead after we failed to deal with a punt forward towards Matt Rhead which sent Lincoln's Ollie Palmer in behind and Jack Grimmer overcommitted himself which allowed Palmer to fire home.

It looked another hammer blow, but it was one that we recovered in a quickfire fashion, when Marc McNulty received a short kick-off (for once) from Michael Doyle and charged towards the penalty area. This then allowed Tom Bayliss to take the ball into box and tee Jordan Shipley up for a composed turn and finish to level the scores once again.

At 2-2 heading into half-time, it felt like the players had demonstrated considerable character to twice come back into the game. However, we were unable to hold onto that scoreline, thanks to an inability once again to defend either the first or second ball from another simple, but telling, punt forward from our opponents, to make it 3-2 in their favour.

In sharp contrast to how we played earlier in the season, it was the attacking play that was functioning and the defensive play that was not. An inability to control the flow of the game, stay calm and do basic defensive things like win headers and stay in shape was being ruthlessly punished by a promotion rival in what had effectively become a rehearsal of the play-offs.

With Lincoln controlling the second-half with effective game management, they then scored a fourth goal, from yet another simple punt forward that we failed to deal with, to seal the win.

The failure to take a point against Lincoln was likely to make both of the final two games of the season nervy affairs as we sought those final four points to mathematically seal a play-off place.

An away trip to a Cheltenham side out-of-form with nothing to play for looked, on paper, to be a highly winnable game, but the recent defeat to Yeovil meant few were taking the situation for granted. Despite being second-best for long periods of the first-half, the Sky Blues were clinical and ruthless on the counter-attack – perhaps determined by the desire not to let another promising situation slip out of our hands – to take a 4-0 lead into half-time.

Tom Bayliss gave the team the lead from a Jordan Shipley cross after some quick thinking by Michael Doyle at a free-kick. Marc McNulty then headed home an excellent cross into the box from Jack Grimmer to make it two. Maxime Biamou teed up Shipley to make it three, before McNulty lobbed Cheltenham's Scott Flinders to give the half-time scoreline an additional emphatic flourish.

With Mansfield Town losing in their game, it looked set to be a golden afternoon for Coventry City as everything fell our way to secure a play-off spot. We then approached the second-half in the mood to add to the score, which perhaps led to the shoddiness in allowing Cheltenham's Joe Morrell to run half the length of the pitch before sending Mohamed Eisa through on goal, then for Lee Burge to bring the livewire striker down in the penalty area.

Eisa duly tucked the penalty home, engendering a 10-minute period of panic as Cheltenham threatened to further narrow the deficit. However,

excellent play from Marc McNulty down the right allowed room for Jack Grimmer to send a cross into the penalty area, which Maxime Biamou converted with a slow-motion overhead kick to make it 5-1 and end any Cheltenham comeback.

It was then a case of how many more we could score with Kyel Reid and Jonson Clarke-Harris coming off from the bench to further wear down a ragged Cheltenham defence. With Jordan Shipley playing a cross-field pass to Kyel Reid, who then poked a ball forward to Marc McNulty, our top scorer demonstrated his supreme confidence to curl home an effort into the top of the far corner of the Cheltenham goal to complete his hat-trick.

The perfect afternoon, although dampened by Mansfield coming back to win their game and forcing us to require a point on the final day of the season against a Morecambe side battling for survival to secure a top seven finish.

With Morecambe also only in need of a point to achieve their aims though, it seemed relatively obvious that neither side would expend too much effort to win the game. The first-half though was a surprisingly competitive affair, with Michael Doyle and Jonson Clarke-Harris forcing Morecambe's goalkeeper into two impressive saves.

A nervous start to the second-half on our part seemed to be a signal to ourselves that there was something to lose if we weren't careful enough. To the chagrin of many in attendance, the team took a more risk-free approach to the game, taking care in possession and refusing to send bodies forward. While there were still chances to win the game, the tempo had clearly

slowed down for both sides and the game played out in a 0-0 draw.

It was our first finish in the top six of a division for 48 years, but more importantly to secure a first ever trip to the play-offs for the club and a chance to cast away the inconsistencies of the season and return the club to League One at the first attempt.



The Play-Offs

A first-ever play-off campaign very much put the club into uncharted territory. 46 games had been played to get us to this point and it would either end in the club's first promotion in 51 years, or the season could be over in the space of 180 minutes.

Having lost to each of the other sides in the play-offs over the second half of the season – with the most recent defeats to Notts County and Lincoln City having been particularly scarring – optimism was far from sky-high heading into the first-leg of the semi-final against Notts County at the Ricoh Arena.

Furthermore, with Mark Robins having experimented with tactics and team selections in the games heading into the play-offs, there was little sense even of what our strongest side was. Against a more settled and confident

Notts County side, there was an inkling that the first-leg could lay witness to another high-profile collapse for a Coventry City side on the big stage.

To make matters worse, an unseasonable deluge in the hour leading up to kick-off created a nearly unplayable surface at the Ricoh Arena. Visions of sodden mishaps in front of a raucous away end of Notts County fans were starting to come to the fore.

Instead, the Sky Blues started the game as the brighter, more composed side, taking the game to Notts County. Had it not been for the swamp-like conditions at the end of the pitch that we were attacking, we may have taken at least a one-goal lead during an encouraging first-half showing – with Marc McNulty, Tom Bayliss and Jordan Shipley fizzling with intent yet

consistently held up by the terrible playing surface.

There was always the risk that not taking the opportunity to take hold of the tie in the first-half would be punished by a street-smart Notts County side. When Jack Grimmer misread the run of the ball as he skidded across a puddle in our right-back zone to allow Notts County's Dan Jones, surging forward from left-back, to deliver a ball towards Jonathan Forte, who then impudently backheeled the ball into the back of the net, it looked like being one of those nights where everything went against us.

With Notts County – who had already appeared to be more than happy with a 0-0 scoreline – managing the rest of the contest relatively well as we laboured in possession against their well-organised defence, it looked as if the next goal was more likely to fall the way of the away side. After an innocuous pass sent Tom Bayliss scampering into the Notts County penalty area, there looked to be minimal danger on, instead, the referee awarded what could be charitably described as the softest of penalties in our favour.

Suddenly, we had been delivered an opportunity to salvage something meaningful from a tie that looked to be slipping away from us. Marc McNulty stepped up to the penalty spot, the tension in the stands almost visible, and calmly slotted it home.

It cued a final five minutes of the home crowd, standing in unison, willing a remarkable turnaround to be completed. A long ball forward which wreaked havoc in the Notts County penalty area was the closest the Sky Blues came to pulling off the win.

Nonetheless, the team had been lucky to find itself on the end of a huge slice of luck to keep us in the tie. Heading to Notts County and winning would be difficult, but at least we would be facing a Notts County also in need of winning.

As if the controversial penalty incident hadn't been enough to spice up a tie between two feisty sides playing on the edge, a stamp, which had been missed by the referee, from Tom Davies on Notts County's Richard Duffy emerged from the television footage of the game, earning Davies a three-game ban and heightening Notts County's sense of injustice.

It set-up the second-leg to be a bear-pit atmosphere for us at Meadow Lane, with Notts County likely to be desperate to settle their scores. It was going to take a composed and mature performance from ourselves to manage the atmosphere and to progress to the final. With Notts County having only lost twice at home all season, it was also going to have to be a performance against the odds.

In the event, something brilliant happened, the Sky Blues exploded into life in what was the biggest and most important game of the season. Right from the off, it was apparent that the team were on it – particularly Marc McNulty and Maxime Biamou, who were effervescent together in attack.

After a spell of pressure in the opening minutes, Notts County failed to clear a corner, which saw Jordan Willis flick the ball back into the six-yard box and for Maxime Biamou to score a trademark overhead kick to give us the lead.

Avoiding the temptation to retreat into our shells and attempt to hold on for grim life to that narrow advantage, the

Sky Blues simply maintained the level of intensity with which we started the game. After several excellent opportunities came and went, a swooping counter-attacking move involving Marc McNulty, Tom Bayliss and Liam Kelly saw Kelly slide the ball into the path of McNulty, who calmly finished to make it 2-0.

Given our track record this season in seeing leads out, there was already the strong feeling that we had done enough to book our place in the play-off final. However, Notts County's Jorge Grant diverted home a long throw-in to dampen what had been a near-perfect first-half showing.

With the desperation of a side knowing that their season had now been reduced to 45 minutes, Notts County threw the kitchen sink at us at the start of the second-half. A back four that had dealt relatively well with Notts County's direct play in the first-half looked shaken, with gaps opening up and allowing Jon Stead through one-on-one with Lee Burge, who produced an excellent reaction save to maintain our narrow advantage.

We failed to heed that warning sign, as once again we failed to adequately defend another long-ball forward from Notts County, which saw Jonathan Forte put the ball into the back of the net. Fortunately, we were saved by a marginal offside call in our favour, which saw the goal, incorrectly, disallowed.

Perhaps that was the moment when it was apparent that the footballing gods were smiling upon us. Soon after, another swift piece of attacking play between Marc McNulty and Maxime Biamou saw the latter swoop the ball home for a third goal on the night to render the Notts County comeback into the territory of unlikely.

Unlikely soon became nigh-on impossible after Tom Bayliss glided through the Notts County defence in the manner that only he can produce, and his shot took a deflection past the County keeper to seal the win.

Two legs of football that had felt like a whole season on fast-forward came to a close. Two clubs that had very quickly developed an intense loathing for each other, and it was the Sky Blues, aided by some questionable refereeing, that had emerged victorious. The final whistle released almost every possible emotion that it is possible for a football fan to go through.

The celebrations on the pitch between players and fans at Meadow Lane encapsulated the bond that a long and close-to-triumphant season had engendered. It was something Coventry City fans simply aren't accustomed to, a team fighting over the course of the season to achieve something positive, players who appeared to love playing for the club, genuinely meaningful moments to remember.

We were a hair's breadth away now from casting one of the club's biggest demons – a fear of success – into the past.

There was a belief heading into the Wembley play-off final against Exeter City that the team had pulled off the hardest part of securing promotion. There was almost a cockiness that because we had triumphed over Notts County and because we were outnumbering Exeter fans at Wembley by three to one, that the game was ours to lose.

Whereas in previous Wembley visits, Coventry City had been the underdogs, there was the expectation heading into the Exeter City game – against a side

that had finished five points ahead of us in the table – that we had come to the national stadium to finish a job off.

The first-half was a cagey affair, but one that the Sky Blues saw the better of. Marc McNulty was sent through within the first 10 minutes, only to be denied by an excellent covering tackle from Exeter's Jordan Storey, and the few other good chances in the opening 45 minutes fell in our favour – something we could possibly come to regret.

The second-half though was as close to 45 minutes of footballing perfection that a fan could possibly imagine for their club. A sunny day at Wembley with promotion on the line and their team producing a victory in, almost, the most emphatic manner possible.

First up, centre-back Jordan Willis – scorer of just six goals in 168 previous appearances for the club – received the ball at the edge of the Exeter penalty area and instinctively curled the ball into the top far corner of the goal.

The Sky Blues seemed to have sensed blood in the Exeter ranks from that point onwards as they set about attacking the rest of the game with clinical intent. Jordan Shipley was sent through by Marc McNulty, with his effort looping gloriously into the back of the net to make it 2-0.

After further chances to make certain of our place in League One for next season, Marc McNulty again demonstrated the under-rated skill he has for bringing team-mates into play, by cutting the ball back for Jack Grimmer at the opposite edge of the penalty area from the first two goals, before the right-back struck with his left-foot and sent the ball curling into the far corner.

The final 20 minutes settled into a pattern of Exeter – desperation forcing them to sacrifice their footballing principles – smacking the ball hopefully towards their big centre-forward, Jayden Stockley, before we raced on the counter seeking to make the scoreline that extra bit emphatic.

A late goal from Exeter's Kyle Edwards did little to put the result in doubt. The manner of the goals, in a 15-minute blitz, had made it apparent that it was simply our day and there was nothing that was going to change it.

Coventry City had just won promotion for the first-time in 51 years, a season where the team finished with its highest ever points tally and in its highest league position in 48 years. This was the reward for so many Sky Blues fans who had endured a painfully-long period of underachievement, with the club having threatened to fall apart entirely not too long ago.

Somehow though, the victory over Notts County felt more cathartic. It was the moment where everything felt like it had come together, with the performance at Wembley almost a repeat of what we saw in the second-leg – minus the tension of the opposition coming back.

However long this feeling lasts, this was the year (or 14-months, including the Checkatrade Trophy victory) where Coventry City became the side that wins things, when the pressure to achieve hadn't suffocated us, when players cared about playing for the club, when new positive memories were created.

It may have only been promotion from League Two, but it still meant everything that we could experience what success for our club feels like.



23/09/17
2-0 Exeter City (h)



28/10/17
3-0 Luton Town (a)



22/12/17
3-2 Wycombe Wanderers (h)

The Season's Key Moments



05/08/17
3-0 Notts County (h)



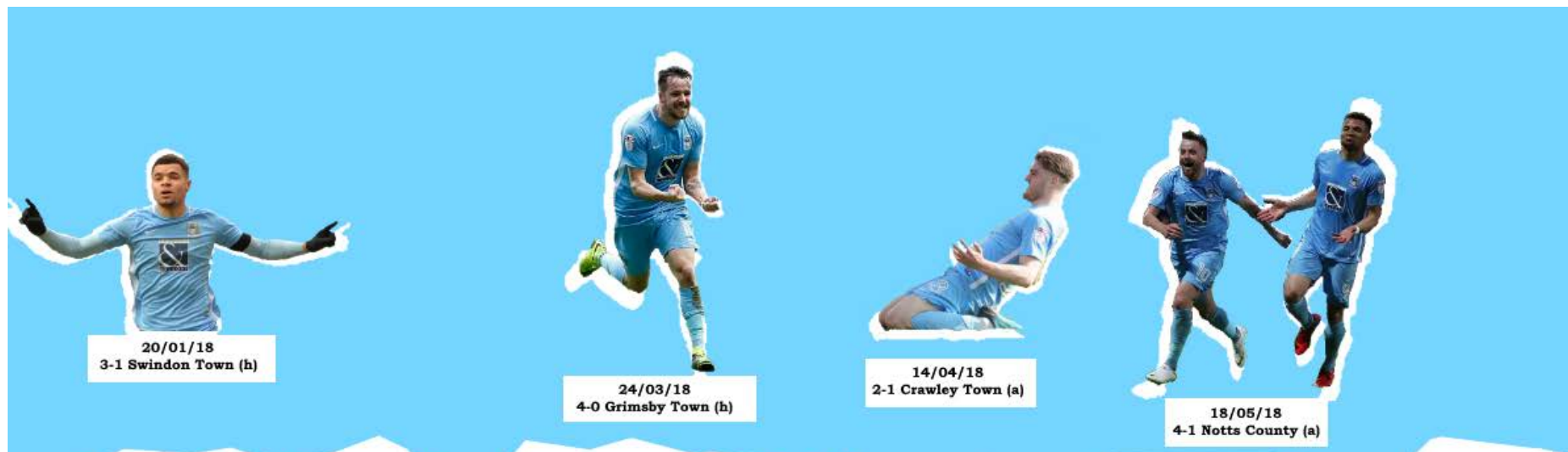
26/09/17
2-1 Swindon Town (a)



18/11/17
2-1 Lincoln City (a)



06/01/18
2-1 Stoke City (h)



The Season's Key Moments





Player of the Season

Aside from Michael Doyle, there have been few other players in this side who have been consistently good across the entirety of the season. Jodi Jones would have been a shoe-in had he been fit for the entire season, while the other obvious contender – Marc McNulty – only hit form in November.

Those two stand-out performers have carried the team through at different stages of the season, but in a season that has been about showing the mental strength to continually recover from set-backs, Michael Doyle has epitomised what is probably the strongest quality of the side this season.

While it isn't always obvious just what Michael Doyle provides for the team, his importance was highlighted during the period in February when he was unavailable and we lost three games in

a row. His return to the side for the Mansfield away game marked an immediate increase in the intensity of the side and an improvement in form that went a long way to secure our highest finish in a division in 38 years.

When Doyle signed, I thought it was something of a risk from Mark Robins to seemingly entrust a 36 year-old with a regular starting position in the side. It seemed like a stop-gap solution to allow the team to bed-in to League Two, while preparing the ground for Liam Kelly and Ben Stevenson to form the central midfield partnership of the side.

Instead, Doyle has made himself the beating heart of this side. From the physical and mental presence he offers in the centre of the park, to the story that recently emerged about how he cajoled Marc McNulty into signing for

the club – even driving him from the airport just to make certain he was joining us.

There have been few players we've had in recent years that have been a Michael Doyle-type – i.e. a tough-tackling midfield presence – but importantly, there has been few as passionate to play for this club as Doyle is.

Seeing him thumping the club badge and gleefully waving the play-off final trophy around at Wembley felt like a genuine release of emotion from him. This was someone after all who endured a long and, often, arduous previous spell with the club.

On pure technical terms, you probably wouldn't have Michael Doyle regularly in the starting XI. His passing – although sometimes excellent – is erratic, he's increasingly losing any turn of pace, and he picks up yellow cards at an alarming and unnecessary rate.

Yet, Doyle's ability to keep plugging away regardless of his level of performance on any given day makes him different from most players, who can be affected by making sloppy errors. That specific quality of his seems to provide the impetus for the rest of the team to continue trying, despite the circumstances of the game.

That determination is why it seems credible that Doyle could continue into his 40s. Doyle seems to be a freak of nature, spurred on by pure bloody-mindedness, often defying medical advice, just to continue football.

It seems like we will have to evolve beyond Doyle over the next season, or two, and we can only hope that by then, enough of his personality will have seeped into the foundations of the club. In ways less tangible than what

he does with and without the ball, Doyle has been an absolutely crucial performer for us over the course of the season. Those kind of players and characters are very rare and you have to appreciate them while they're at your club.



Young Player of the Season

In a year where several young talents have made big impacts on our season, there is one name that stands out nonetheless – Tom Bayliss.

A goal just two minutes into his league debut for the club – an important win over Cheltenham Town when the team was struggling for form – announced Bayliss on the first-team stage. What was most impressive about his debut performance wasn't the somewhat fluky goal he scored but the way he grew into the game to help us see out the result.

Mark Robins commented after that Cheltenham game that he had been advised against playing Bayliss – the feeling being he wasn't quite ready for men's football. While standing at just over six foot, Bayliss is hardly the most physically imposing of players and looked during the first-half of his

debut that a stiff breeze could have knocked him over. Yet Bayliss has proven since that pure technical ability trumps physique.

Bayliss improved rapidly from the raw talent that he was on his debut, stepping up to supply the dynamism and creativity to the side that had been lost when Jodi Jones' season was ended prematurely in November. He very quickly transitioned from a teenager playing his first few games in senior football to a bona fide key member of the first-team.

That drive that Bayliss offers in the centre of the park made what had been a stodgy side into a much more functional attacking unit. Over two thirds of the league goals we've scored this season have come since Bayliss made his debut at the start of December – which speaks volumes.

Bayliss' talent is such that he has even been able to be an effective player even when deployed out of position on the right wing. While he is certainly less effective when shoehorned out wide, Bayliss still makes an impact because he's an excellent carrier of the ball and has a preternatural ability to glide past opponents.

His goals and assist numbers out-strip James Maddison when he was at a similar stage in his Coventry City career (albeit Maddison was playing for us at a higher level), which underlines just how big an impact Bayliss (who has played in a deeper position than Maddison) has made for us already. The crazy thing is that those numbers would be higher if Bayliss possessed greater confidence and decisiveness in the final third.

The sad reality of Coventry City's current position in the footballing food-chain is that it's unrealistic to expect Bayliss to be around for much longer than another season, possibly much less than that.

In a sense, as soon as we knew he was special, we had already accepted he would quickly be off. It's a situation that underlines the need for this club to progress further, in order for us to keep hold of the likes of Tom Bayliss and James Maddison, when they emerge, for that little bit longer.



Mark Robins

Mark Robins is now the only Coventry City manager to have been to Wembley twice and won twice. He has registered the club's highest-ever points tally, its highest league position in 48 years and, most importantly, the first promotion in over half a century.

Whether the team that Mark Robins put together should have required the play-offs to achieve promotion has been rendered an academic discussion. All that matters is that he has been the manager who has achieved it, and at what was probably a key juncture for the club.

There was always the risk that this season could have seen us suffer a hangover from a traumatic previous campaign – just look at what happened to both Port Vale and Chesterfield this season. However, Mark Robins' approach to squad-building and an

emphasis on defensive discipline meant that we hit the ground running.

Michael Doyle and Liam Kelly probably stand as the tent-pole signings of the summer. Two experienced players who had been on-pitch leaders at their previous clubs, they gave us a level of nous in the opening few months of the season that set us up for the rest of the campaign.

Doyle and Kelly though were also symbolic of how Mark Robins failed, in a sense, to fulfil the potential that this squad had to win automatic promotion. Those hopes of a top three finish slipped away from us in those games against Forest Green, Colchester United, Chesterfield and several others where we didn't take enough risks in order to score goals – with that Michael Doyle and Liam Kelly axis in the centre of the park slowing

play down when we needed to move up through the gears.

An important question to ask about whether you can be pleased with the manager incumbent at your club is whether the team and individual players have improved over the course of the season. With Mark Robins this season, it's a case of whether you focus on how the performances of individual attacking players such as Maxime Biamou and Marc McNulty improved, along with our general attacking play, or on the gradual loss of defensive sturdiness.

Where Robins has succeeded where previous Coventry City managers have failed though is in recovering from poor results. Whereas in the most recent seasons where we'd challenged for promotion under Tony Mowbray and Steven Pressley saw more exciting attacking football, both sides folded as soon as there was a sense that opponents had found us out.

Mark Robins was continually able to reinvent the side, or simply to re-motivate the players, after set-backs. The experience of it has been frustrating because the team has constantly needed re-setting after building a head of steam, but it's taken us into territory that other Coventry City managers have failed to get us to.

In particular, it's hard to see too many other previous Coventry City managers being able to overcome the loss of the team's key individual player – like Mark Robins did with Jodi Jones – to improve the side overall. Robins may have gotten lucky that there was someone like Tom Bayliss sitting in the academy who possessed the talent to drive the team forward, but Robins reportedly went against the advice of his fellow coaches, who thought Bayliss wasn't ready yet.

It goes against the cautions, pragmatic Mark Robins archetype that he was the manager who was willing to throw a youngster into the mix at a crucial phase of the season, it probably is a sign of Robins growing as a manager.

Another example of Robins' growth has been how he has gotten the best out of Marc McNulty this season. Not only did Robins more-or-less stick by McNulty when it looked to anyone who saw us regularly that the goals would not come (certainly not in the quantity they eventually did) but this is from a manager who struggled to get the best out of Paddy Madden – one of the best finishers outside the Championship – while at Scunthorpe.

A theory of mine is that Mark Robins has benefitted from not having the emergency loan system available to him. Not being able to call upon short-term solutions to occasional problems has possibly sharpened his focus on getting the best out of the players already at his disposal.

For all of the credit that Robins deserves for keeping the team going after set-backs, some of those set-backs have been caused by his trait of punishing individuals for putting in poor performances. It saw us in a situation heading into the play-off semi-final first leg where there wasn't really an indication of what our strongest team or starting formation was going to be.

With that in mind, it feels like there isn't necessarily a structure that has been put in place over the course of this season that we could have built from had we failed to win promotion and lost key players. Robins has been reliant on some excellent individual performances from the likes of Jodi Jones, Tom Bayliss and Marc McNulty to keep the team going this campaign.

Mark Robins' decisive and longer-term-focused recruitment strategy has meant though that were we to lose some of our best players, we would only really have to focus sourcing replacements in the transfer market. This certainly contrasts to Tony Mowbray's reliance on loan players, which left us needing an entirely new team, which increased the margin for failure last season.

We are in a position where, barring losing two or three outstanding individuals, there is a squad in place that could ideally stay together for quite a while. That is a much-needed change in emphasis about the club.

Mark Robins arrived at the club when there was a desperate need for longer-term planning and stability. Dropping into League Two has meant also that we've needed more of that emphasis on winning promotion as quickly as possible, Robins has somehow managed to achieve that while also, hopefully, laying the foundations for the next couple of seasons.

It would be foolish to make any assumptions about how long the plans Mark Robins has put into place at the club will last. We only have one full season of evidence thus far, and we all know that a poor run of results can put pressure on a manager. However, it feels like Mark Robins is the safe pair of hands this club is currently in need of.



Looking Ahead...

While promotion is a massive achievement in and of itself – it hasn't been done by a Coventry City side since 1967 – it is promotion from a level that the club should never have sunk to. League One may well match the financial limitations this club currently operates under, but ambition now we're in League One is surely to kick-on from there.

Importantly, we will have momentum heading into the new league season, which probably increases the possibilities of what is achievable. Momentum is a rare thing for a football club to have and it's important to take advantage of it when you have it. All it takes is a poor summer in the transfer market, a managerial sacking followed by a bad appointment, a big injury to a key player and we're back to where we were mid-way through our most recent season in League One.

Another thing that you cannot rule out with Coventry City in our current guise is our owners doing something unnecessarily detrimental to the club's stability. While I think they prefer a hands-off approach whereby the manager is allowed to do what they want as long as the club isn't losing money, we're still in a situation where we only know for sure that we'll be at the Ricoh Arena for another season, it's not clear how the club is intending to build a new training ground, and the owners could also be looking to cash in on our star players.

I think the track record more recently suggests that SISU (or Tim Fisher, Dave Boddy, or whoever is pulling the strings at the club) won't want to rock the boat, but you just never know – especially with the latest round of judicial review coming up.

As a club, it's important that we can hold onto and maintain this good thing that has just happened on-the-pitch. The most pressing issue is firstly to make sure that we can hold onto our best players. Moving up to League One probably doesn't change the likelihood that much that Tom Bayliss will leave, but it should go a long way to ensuring that we hang onto Marc McNulty – although, it depends what calibre of club goes in for him – as well as Jodi Jones – who could well have drawn interest, even while still recovering from injury.

Getting the summer's recruitment right for the second season running is going to be important too. Thanks to the work Mark Robins and Tommy Widdrington – the now-former head of recruitment – did last summer, there isn't a need to bring in a whole new side yet again, however, those three or four key players that we can bring in to improve the team could be the difference between getting caught in a relegation scrap or being one of the play-off outsiders in League One.

In goal, there probably isn't the need to bring in someone new. Lee Burge certainly still has errors in his game, but more often than not this season, he has been a reliable and confident presence and is also someone who's proven he can play to a reasonably high standard in League One. Unless there is someone of whom we're 100% certain is better than Burge, there is no need to take a punt on a new keeper.

The situation is probably similar in defence too. Jordan Willis has been the most consistent of our central defenders, while Dominic Hyam, Tom Davies and Rod McDonald have all shown at times that they can play to a high standard at League Two level. I'm

not sure all four of our centre-backs will make the step up to League One level, which is possibly a reason to bring in someone new – although, again, whoever we bring in would have to be better than who we already have. We also have to factor in that all four of our centre-backs are contracted – or have been offered a contract – for next season, so bringing someone in would require moving someone out.

At right-back, Jack Grimmer looks to have right-back nailed down, even though he will be more exposed against a higher-quality of attacker. With Dion Kelly-Evans leaving the club, there may be an opportunity to bring someone in who can at least challenge Jack Grimmer to kick-on.

It's an interesting situation at left-back, where both Ryan Haynes and Chris Stokes have endured unconvincing seasons at League Two level but have both shown during our recent spell in League One that they can play at that level. While it's possible that Mark Robins would look to bring in a better player in the position, it requires moving one of the two out of the club.

In midfield, a lot rests on whether we can keep hold of Tom Bayliss, and if Jodi Jones and Tony Andreu can return from long-term injuries at the level they were before. The transfer window ending earlier this season should at least avoid a situation where the first few weeks of the campaign are disrupted by transfer speculation, but if Bayliss was to go, hopefully, it's done early enough for us to source an adequate replacement.

Were Bayliss to leave, we appear to already have his replacements in place in the form of Zain Westbrooke – who is a bit of a wildcard as a signing – along with Tony Andreu. Had Andreu

stayed fit, it's possible that Tom Bayliss would simply not have emerged this season, although, he did tend to operate as a more orthodox number 10 – a role we currently don't have in the side.

Elsewhere, I would expect Michael Doyle and Liam Kelly to at least start next season as our first-choice central midfield pairing. At some point we'll have to evolve beyond Doyle, as the increasing loss of pace he has endured this season will be more exposed at League One level. Signing another strong central midfield option is important, but it's made difficult by the fact that Doyle is currently the beating heart of this side.

Bringing in wide players of a higher-calibre could be the most pressing area of summer recruitment that we need to make. Tom Bayliss and Jordan Shipley were excellent in the play-offs, but Bayliss isn't a wide player and could be leaving the club, while the likely departure of Kyel Reid leaves little back-up for Jordan Shipley.

Jodi Jones' return will be important, while it's easy to forget that Peter Vincenti is still around for next season. The addition of Reise Allasani from Dulwich Hamlet looks to be with this area of the pitch in mind, like Westbrooke, his signing is a bit of wildcard. We probably only need then to bring in one good wide player, which puts the focus on quality rather than quantity.

In attack, we need to make sure that we keep hold of Marc McNulty, as it takes the pressure off Jordan Ponticelli, Maxime Biamou, along with the likely permanent signing of Jonson Clarke-Harris to step-up to a higher-level as goalscorers – which they are all potentially capable of.

Maxime Biamou deserves the chance to prove he can play at a higher-level alongside McNulty, but it may well be more important for him to score goals next season if we are to presume that McNulty won't score at the same rate in League One as he did in League Two. Ponticelli and Clarke-Harris are able back-ups with the potential to break into the side, however, there may be the temptation to bring in an improvement to Biamou as McNulty's strike partner, which relegates either's position in the pecking order.

As is apparent, this isn't going to be a heavily-active summer in the transfer market. Mark Robins can afford to take a more patient approach, with there being few genuine gaps in the squad. If he can get it right, we have the core of a side that has just won promotion and will be full of belief and big-game winning experience that can be powerful, even if we're not packed with proven League One performers.

For once, this isn't going to be a summer where Coventry City fans are desperate for new signings to provide hope for something better. This was the season we had been waiting so long for and the challenge now is to keep it going for as long as possible.